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STINE

PROLOGUE

RITA

OVER the white winding road the autumn sunshine burned, hot, glaring, and brilliant, but within the woods that lay on either side all was cool and dusk and still.

The music of a brook hidden in some leafy hollow, the flutter of a bird's wing stirring the boughs—these alone disturbed the silence. The wood was a nook of forest land in a district of Southern France—a beautiful, dreamy, shadowy place, with the heat and noise and turmoil of the busy world shut out and forgotten, and where nature held a court that was exclusively her own, and with which no human laws had yet interfered.

The birds and the bees and the butterflies had the wood all to themselves now, and the brown brook sang its own song as it chattered over the pebbles and caught here and there a glancing sunbeam from amidst the veil of leafage, and let it dance among its ripples, and gleam upon its depths. The hushed sweet peace of the country reigned around; the white road seemed deserted; only afar off a dark speck moved, with

certain motion—something so far away and shadowy,

that it might have been a cloud of smoke from a fire, or a human figure. There was no one to

speculate on its identity with either. The hours

of golden glory of the day was changing to the

night. Sombre shadows stole among the wood,

and in the mystery of darkness, and the silence

grew more deep, while the faint light of the

of a convent bell.

The dark speck no bigger

than a dot on the road, but close to

its dim recesses, now at

last, he carried on

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in his arms, and the sweat stood in great beads on his brow, while through the stillness the sound of his laboured breathing came in quick oppressive gasps. For a moment he leant against the stem of a tree, as if for support, and his eyes glanced furtively from side to side with that restless apprehensive gaze which is born of fear or guilt. When he had recovered breath, he once more threw himself erect, and then, with a last look over the deserted road, he plunged into the depths of woodland, over which the twilight shadows threw so dark a veil.

Where the shafts of sunlight had fallen, now quivered the pale sweet luminance of moonbeams.

The grasses were wet with dew ; the faint hoot of a night-bird sounded weird and eerie through the silence. The mosses and creepers that hung in strange festoons among the branches gleamed filmlike and silvery with the moisture of the dew and the dewfall, and the sheen of the moon-rays. A footfall broke the solemn stillness ; a figure came with swift uncertain steps through the aisles of the stirless trees. The pale weird light fell on a human face, cruel-looking, and with a coward's fear in the shrinking eyes and quivering lips. On, on, with hurrying steps and bated breath, it pressed ; on, on, among the crowding trunks that seemed now like a phalanx of opposing force bidding defiance to the efforts at escape ; on, on, while the cold clammy touch of the hanging mosses smote his brow and made him shudder as if at the touch of a dead hand ; on, on, with the dry twigs crackling beneath his feet and the tossing leaves above his head ; on till the road was reached again and the ghostlike sights and sounds of the wood were left behind.

Then he paused a moment, and keeping still in the shadow of the great tree-trunks, looked warily up and down the long white road once more.

All was still and deserted. Only the cold pale moon lit up its solitude, and her light alone fell on the dark and evil face that peered forth from its hiding-place.

Then, with swift steps, the man took his way once more, leaving the silence and solitude of the wood behind him.

The night-moths fluttered to and fro among the leaves and mosses ; the cries of the owls, the whir of the bats' wings ; the strange tumultuous stir and flutter of life that have in them so weird a terror—all these went on their way, and filled the air and haunted the hours as the darkness passed onwards to the reawakened glory of dawn.

All these—yes, and one other sound, new and strange to the heart of those woodland solitudes.

It was the piteous wail of a little child.

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

"THE ELEMENT THAT IS BOTH FRIEND AND FOE"

It was evening in Paris.

A cold chill wind, in whose breath winter still struggled with spring for pre-eminence, was blowing through the lamp-lit streets. The sky was without stars, and dark clouds drifted here and there in stormy masses, contrasting forcibly with the glare and glitter below. Before one of the most popular theatres a vast crowd had assembled. Amongst it were two young Englishmen, who were listening with considerable amusement to the fire of question, answer, and repartee going on around them.

"Is it, then, certain she will be here to-night?"

"Of course, silly one. Hast thou not read the bills?"

"She is, then, quite recovered from her illness?" said a pretty girl, who was clinging closely to the arm of a handsome young artisan. "Ah! but it is long since she appeared. Dost thou remember her, Antoine?"

"Remember her? Who would not that had once seen her?" was the rejoinder.

"And is she beautiful?"

"Beautiful? Thou shalt see for thyself, little one! She scarce would have won so great a name were she *not*—at least in Paris."

"But she has talent, too, Antoine; so they say."

"Talent—yes. She has the talent that pays best now. She dresses exquisitely, sings divinely, and looks like a picture—*voilà tout!*"

"And enough, I should think—even for Paris," said one of the Englishmen to his companion. "We are getting critical, it seems. Offenbach discussed by a blouse, and beauty dissected by the workroom! What do you think of that, Cecil?"

"Natural enough. This is the age of progress and the march of intellect. Its effects are visible first among the class who have been so long denied voice or power of their own."

"Do you anticipate another revolution then?"

"Not such a one as you mean. A revolution of thought, feeling, opinion, I do anticipate and hope to see."

"Who is this actress they have been discussing? Do you know?"

"Not at all. I seldom go to theatres, and I detest opéra bouffe!"

"You are such a model young man, Cis! What a pity you are not the head of the family. We should have you performing miracles in the shape of improvements, alterations, and innovations, through the length and breadth of the country. That reminds me, by-the-bye, why does not Malden stand for your borough?"

"Why? for the best of all reasons, and about the only one he ever troubles himself to give. He doesn't like the bother, or feel capable of undertaking it."

"Then you might step in, Cis. What's to prevent it?"

A pained look crossed the bright open face of the young man. "Everything," he said laconically; "but, chief of all—appearances. It would hardly do for the younger brother to accept what the elder has refused. Besides, it has not been offered me!"

"But it may be; and then?"

"I should decline it."

"It's a beastly shame the way younger sons are served! Don't you think so, Cecil?"

"The law of primogeniture has had its attendant inconveniences ever since the days of Esau," said the other. "I expect it will continue to have them until the millennium!"

At this juncture the doors of the theatre opened, and the two friends were carried along by the tide of human life around them, until they found themselves at the box-office.

Paying down their money, they shortly afterwards found themselves in one of the daintiest and prettiest of all the many dainty and pretty temples erected to Thalia.

"Not Offenbach after all," said Cecil Calverley's companion Lord Danvers, as he looked at his programme. "A novelty by all that's wonderful! and written expressly for Mdlle. Thé d'Egmont. Well, we're in for it, I suppose, Cis. I've often heard of her, but never seen her."

"Probably," answered Cecil listlessly, as his eyes wandered over the rapidly-filling house. "How crowded the theatre is to-night!"

"By Jove! if there isn't Lady Gustavus and her triad of daughters there, in the box opposite! Look, Cis."

"So it is. I wonder what brings her to Paris at this time

of the year. Pursuit of game, I suppose? I wonder who's the object of her maternal devotion now?"

"Lady Irene, evidently. See how sweetly she is whispering and smiling. Can't you imagine, Danvers, what's going on?"

"Take care of the draught, my love; are you sure you are comfortable, my sweet; do keep your cloak round you, you know how delicate you are, &c.," mimicked Lord Danvers. "Ridiculous old woman! How hot she was after your brother last season, Cecil; but it was no use I suppose?"

"No; Malden is very unimpressible, and if he ever did take a wife, I'm sure it wouldn't be one of whose delicacy of constitution and sensitive disposition he was always being assured by her mother!"

"I daresay not. Ah, there's the curtain rising. Now to be bored as usual."

With a sigh of resignation the young man leant back in his seat, and fixed his eyes on the stage.

It was impossible to discover what was the subject of the piece at first; it seemed one of those fairylike burlesques, wholly nonsensical and half unintelligible, of which the French are so fond.

A scene of wood, and water, and aisles of roses, and plashing fountains, where airy sylphs floated and danced to strains of music, and sang comic choruses that raised shouts of laughter and storms of applause. A scene that made the Englishmen shrug their shoulders, and growl denunciations on their light-hearted mercurial neighbours, and mutter "Trash!" under their thick moustaches.

But suddenly the lights were dimmed, the airy dancers retreated to the wood beyond and grouped themselves amidst the rose-aisles, with due regard to effect and—exposure! Then from amidst the leafy background a slender, graceful form came floating forwards, a striking contrast to the massed loveliness of the dancing-girls in the simplicity of her attire and the modest grace of her actions.

She was exquisitely beautiful—fair as the lily she represented, with sunny flower-crowned hair, and soft azure eyes, and a voice, sweet and true and far-reaching as the mirth of a lark.

Amidst all the riot of sound and noisy declamation and confusion of dancing that ever and anon surrounded her, she stood out clear and distinct among the rest—her dainty loveliness, her perfect grace, and her marvellous voice winning for her constant and rapturous applause.

"The idea of a woman like that turning burlesque actress! It is shameful!" exclaimed Cecil, after the curtain had descended on the first act. "I wonder she degrades her talent by performing such nonsense!"

"The audience don't seem to think it nonsense!" exclaimed Lord Danvers. "Scenic effects, unredeemed vulgarity, and broad allusions, combined with unlimited breakdowns and comic choruses, is the acme of dramatic success in the present day. The worst of it is, the mischief is creeping our way too. Passion, and pathos, and genius are all thrown away. The English stage, like that of its fantastical neighbour, appeals to popular taste through the medium of vulgarity and *bizarrierie*. It may ruin morals, destroy art, and desecrate better feeling, but—it pays!"

"The *raison d'être* of everything nowadays," said Cecil, thoughtfully. "But what do you think of the Thé d'Egmont? Doesn't she seem out of place here to you?"

"You mean to *you*!" laughed his friend. "My dear Cis, don't afflict your tender heart by suppositions of that sort. An actress is the most delusive of all her delusive sex. As for being out of place, do you think she would undertake a part for which she was unfitted or disinclined?"

"But if popular taste runs in one groove, actresses, like writers, must supply it. If burlesque is to be the order of the day they must act burlesque, or starve."

"True enough. Of course, they are more sinned against than sinning; of course, they have not created a demand in the first place to supply it in the next; of course, they are angels in tights and tinsel; we all know that. Dear Cis, what a boy you are in some things still!"

"Am I?" laughed Cecil. "It's a thing of which I can't accuse you, at all events, Danvers. You are almost as cynical, and quite as faithless, as my old enemy, Père Jerome."

"How is that worthy Jesuit, by-the-bye? Have you come across him lately?"

"We met last in the heart of a French wood, and under somewhat peculiar circumstances," said Cecil, gravely. "I was astonished to find him there, but he told me he was going to some convent on business."

"As father confessor, of course?"

"I did not ask. We began our usual disagreements very speedily."

"And you, as usual, had the best of it?"

"I don't know that. The truth is, Danvers, I had an adventure in that same wood—at least, that is to say, I made a discovery. I found a child!"

"A child! What on earth did you do with it?"

"I was extremely puzzled at first, I can tell you. The sound of cries first attracted my attention, and then I found it had been tied to a tree and left to perish in the heart of this lonely wood. Of course I unfastened it, took it with me,

and was just debating what I should do to find some place of shelter, when up comes Père Jerome——"

"Phew—w—w!"

"What does that significant whistle mean, Danvers?"

"Odd, don't you think, that he should have been in the neighbourhood at that time?"

"His reasons were plausible enough."

"That I don't doubt. But go on; your adventure has a tinge of romance that interests me."

"After much hesitation I agreed to leave the child at a convent in the neighbourhood. It is a retreat dedicated to Notre Dame de Bon Secours, and especially devoted to works of charity and penance."

"I wonder what took Father Jerome there, then? Neither is much in his line."

"How you do interrupt a fellow, Danvers! Well, I left the little thing——"

"Boy or girl, Cis?"

"Girl. I left her, as I said, with the Mother Superior, only stipulating that I was to see her at intervals if I felt disposed."

"What an odd idea! Are you going to adopt her, old boy?"

"No, of course not; but I feel an interest in her, naturally."

"Isn't that coming it rather strong, Cis?"

"You are as bad as Father Jerome," said the young man, angrily. "I declare I won't tell you any more."

"Is there any more?"

"Of course. I made every inquiry possible. I advertised——"

"Oh, Cis, Cis, you'll kill me! Did you really suppose that after such an evident inclination for infanticide, the real owners of this lost property would be likely to come forward?"

"I hardly supposed it. I merely thought I might get some clue, some information respecting her. But I've not succeeded."

"You surprise me!"

"There—my story's done; and the curtain's rising. She looks more lovely than ever, doesn't she?"

"Gaslight and *tulle illusion*, my dear boy. What nonsense she's talking, to be sure!"

"But what a mouth to talk it with!——My God! Danvers, what's that?"

For at this moment a terrific report shook the theatre to its foundations. Thick volumes of smoke issued from below the stage, and sheets of flame burst in on every side.

The vast audience rose like one man. Cries of "Fire! fire!" resounded in all directions. Howling, shrieking, stamping, like mad things, they rushed to the entrance. On the stage, in her fluttering gossamer and tinselled glitter of fairyism, a woman stood like one dazed and stupefied by a sudden shock, while sheets of flame, and clouds of smoke, and the odour of charred wood and burning stuffs, blinded and dazzled her senses.

Suddenly, in a moment, she was conscious of a kind voice whispering cheering words, of a strong eager clasp, that raised and bore her through burning wood and crashing timbers, how and where she knew not, till the cool night air was on her brow and reviving her swooning senses.

Like a living river, the wild throng swept from the doors, the strong trampling the weak, and forcing their way in terrified blindness over crushed and trodden bodies. On every face was fear, on every lip that one dread cry of "Fire!"

The rescuer and rescued turned swiftly away from the frightful tumult, and hurried down a quiet narrow street close by.

"We are safe now. You had better rest a moment. I trust you are not hurt," said Cecil to his companion.

She turned and looked at him; at his flushed face, his panting chest, his brave, bold, handsome head towering above her in the lamplight. Her white lips parted, as if to speak, but no words came. She gave one sobbing sigh, as of intense terror, and fell forward at his feet like one dead.

CHAPTER II

BEHIND THE SCENES

For a moment Cecil stood there bewildered. There was not a living creature to be seen near at hand, though from the streets he had just quitted came the cries and shrieks of frightened women and the hoarser voices of men.

That the theatre was on fire was evident now, for the sky was red with the glow of lurid light, and the air thick with sulphurous smoke, while the rapid rush of engines and the shouts of the coming firemen added fresh confusion to the scene.

The young man knelt down by the side of his senseless companion, and fanned her brow and chafed her small cold hands in his. But for long she manifested no signs of life—

only lay there in his arms like a beautiful statue, with the chill moon-rays on her face, and the cold night wind stirring the filmy gauze and laces of her dress.

"She will die with cold," thought the young man in alarm, and hastily unbuttoning his own overcoat, he wrapped it round her bare and snowy shoulders.

At last she moved and opened her eyes. Dizzy and bewildered still by the awful fear that had struck her down on the burning stage, they rested on the face of her preserver. She rose hurriedly, and, trembling in every limb, poured forth a stream of broken words with all the eloquence of foreign tongue, and action.

"Say nothing about it; there is no need," said the young Englishman. "If you will give me permission I will see if I can find a cab for you. Do you think you are well enough to go home now?"

She understood so well his delicacy in putting the question thus. He would not take advantage of the situation to discover her address, or force his companionship on her. How few of the men she had ever known would have acted with such deference to the feelings of an actress!

"I am quite well—quite recovered, monsieur," she said. "As for thanking you for your great bravery and kindness, that I cannot do; it is more than words have power for, or life has means."

"Oh, it is nothing! Pray don't trouble to speak of such a trifle. If I hadn't done it, someone else would," returned Cecil, a little ungraciously, and with all an Englishman's horror of a scene. "Can I leave you here, or will you accompany me?"

"I will go with you. I dare not remain alone here," she said, taking the arm he offered. "Ah, mon Dieu! that fire—how terrible it is!"

"Do not look at it," he said gently. "It will unnerve you again. We must go this way to avoid the crowd."

She trembled visibly. The horror of that scene was still upon her; the thought that she might now be lying beneath those burning timbers, a charred and lifeless mass, with no remnant of the beauty and grace that had enthralled her audience but one short hour before. In silence Cecil led her through the narrow gloomy lane, and when they reached a broader and better thoroughfare he hailed the first passing cab and placed her within.

"Perhaps you would rather direct the man yourself," he said hesitatingly as he stood with the door in his hand.

"Not at all. My address is no secret from you," she said softly. "To-morrow, monsieur, at noon, if you have the

leisure or inclination to renew our acquaintance, I shall be happy to receive you."

Cecil bowed silently, and seeing he waited for the directions, she said hurriedly :

"I live at 13, Rue de la Couronne."

He lifted his hat, closed the door, and in another instant was standing alone in the street, looking after the rapidly-retreating vehicle. "I seem cut out for adventures," he smiled to himself as he turned away and retraced his steps in order to find if anything could be seen of his friend in the crowd at the theatre; "but this is one which I have very little inclination to pursue."

Once among the crowd he found it no easy matter to get out of it again. The flames were rapidly dying down under the showering floods of the engines. The loss of life had not, after all, been so great as might have been expected, for every way of egress had been hastily opened, and the members of the company themselves had escaped through the stage-door.

Many reports were spread as to the cause and origin of the fire, but the general belief was that the explosion arose from a spark falling on some detonating powder that had been required in one of the scenes. The explosion itself would have been of small consequence, but a quantity of light muslin had been carelessly tossed down by one of the numerous employes, and this had immediately caught fire, and spread upwards until the whole of the stage was destroyed.

Having seen the fire extinguished and the crowd dispersed, Cecil lit a cigar and strolled back to his hotel. It was close upon midnight when he entered his rooms and found Lord Danvers comfortably ensconced there smoking.

He raised his eyebrows, as Cecil walked in, but did not rise.

"How do you feel after that last quixotic 'enterprise?'" he asked. "'Pon, my word, Cis, you're the most extraordinary fellow I ever came across. Fancy rushing on to the stage, and dragging off a woman and disappearing down a trap-door before I even knew what was going on! How do you get the steam up, my dear boy?"

Cecil laughed a little impatiently.

"You don't mean to say you'd have let the woman be burnt to death without making an effort to save her? Come, Danvers, you can't persuade me you're quite so cold-blooded as that."

"I don't mean to persuade you of anything, my dear fellow, except that I'm awfully hungry; and as I couldn't

settle down till you came in, perhaps you'll be good enough to order supper now."

"Certainly. I'm glad to see you safe; Danvers. I was afraid you might have got crushed in the crowd. I was a long time looking out for you. I saw the last of the fire too. I'm afraid there's an awful lot of damage done."

"Very likely," was the answer, as the young lord rose and took his seat at the supper table. "You've come in for some of it, I expect."

"I! How?"

"What did the rescued fair one say to you? Vowed eternal gratitude, of course, and—made an appointment."

"How the deuce do you know?"

"Easiest thing in the world, my dear fellow! Could a Frenchwoman and an actress resist such a temptation?"

"You seem to have a very poor opinion of actresses."

"Of the generality—yes," was the rejoinder; and Cecil saw the usual listless ironic expression of his face had changed to one of saddened thoughtfulness.

They had been friends for many years, these two, and yet Cecil Calverley knew that a veil of silence hung between them on one subject—a subject that neither could wholly avoid, and yet never dared discuss. The old restraint crept over him now as he looked at the delicate thoroughbred face before him; a face so apt to mislead an ordinary observer by its perfect impassiveness and sternly-suppressed feeling; a face which was too haughtily calm, too sternly grave for the years it had known, and yet could be so strangely gentle when once the mask was removed.

He was silent a long time—long enough for Cecil to finish his meal and hesitatingly ask him if he would not do the same. Then he rose and impatiently pushed away the plate before him.

"Your pardon, old fellow. I am bad company I know. Draw up your chair to the fire and let us forget our troubles in smoke."

"I don't think I've any to forget," laughed Cecil, as he obeyed his companion's directions, and wheeled a small table with wines and liqueurs on it up to the fire.

"Lucky dog!" sighed Lord Danvers.

Both the young men now seated themselves, and proceeded to envelope their heads and faces in a cloud of aromatic vapour with the solemnity due to such an important ceremony.

The clock above them softly chimed; the soothing warmth and entire stillness of the room acted like a spell on their senses. It was an hour for comfort and confidence—an hour

whose influence on the male sex is similar to that dressing-room *quart-d'heure* which women love, when maids are dismissed, and tresses released from the tortures of fashion, and dainty *robes-de-chambre* take the place of tight skirts, and tighter bodices.

"Cis, old fellow," said Lord Danvers slowly, at last, "tell me frankly, has this episode to-night made any impression on you?"

"Why do you ask?" said the young man in astonishment, raising his frank clear eyes to the face before him.

"For the simple reason most people do ask questions—because I want to know."

"If you mean that I have fallen in love with Mdlle. Thé, or that her *beaux yeux* are haunting my present meditations—certainly not," laughed Cecil. "Love and I have still to make acquaintance. We have not even shaken hands yet."

"A pity you can't be strangers always," was the moody retort. "A man in love is the most helpless fool on all this earth, and the most miserable!"

"Danvers!"

"Yes. You may well look astonished. You never thought to hear me say such words. My dear boy, there is a page in my life dark enough to make you take warning from me. God knows if I could blot it out I would, but I cannot!"

The cold colourless face was strangely moved, the firm lips trembled, and Cecil looked at him in wondering silence, but yet with that perfect sympathy in his eyes that had dated from the days of their boyish friendship at Eton, had lived on through separation, absence, worldly calls, and fashionable duties.

"Don't speak of it, dear old fellow," said Cecil heartily. "What matters the past, be it wrong or right, while we still have the future to amend it?"

"A wrong done can never be amended, Cis," said his friend sorrowfully. "If it could, I would pray to live as once I prayed to die, as I often pray now when the old sorrow comes fresh and keen as ever to my heart. It has come so to-night."

"Why to-night?"

"That woman's face brought it back. To you, Cis, she was only an actress; to me she was the sister of the only woman I ever loved, or ever shall love."

"The sister!" exclaimed Cecil in astonishment.

"Yes, the sister of Valerie d'Egmont. She was a beautiful woman when I saw her first—only four years ago, Cis—and she was the rage in Paris then. Her beauty helped her suc-

cess ; her pride marred her whole career. She was the wife of as thorough a blackguard as ever spoilt a woman's life ; and he only valued her splendid talents, her queenly beauty, as means to his own selfish ends. She was of good family, but had been forced into marrying this brute, as most French girls are forced, from motives of convenience. He found out her talents and insisted upon her going on the stage. Her splendid gifts, her unmistakable genius soon made her celebrated ; but an actress's life is not a life for a proud, pure-minded, sensitive nature to live and thrive in, and it killed her. She was received in very good society when I made her acquaintance, and from that hour I loved her as madly and hopelessly as ever man loved. I did not know she was married at first ; her husband was never with her, and she looked so young, so fragile, so girlish, it never entered my head to suppose her a wife. I found it out afterwards, but it was too late. My whole heart had gone out to her in that first meeting, and I could not take it back. Don't look at me so pityingly, Cis ; it unnerves me, and the worst is yet to come. I don't know why I tell you this to-night ; perhaps it is to serve as a warning, though to the best of my knowledge Thé d'Egmont is not married, and not—proud."

Cecil was silent, save for that glance of sympathy and interest.

"Well," resumed Lord Danvers, "I saw her often ; sometimes at her own house, sometimes in society, and I can safely say I never won from her a word or look that could in any way encourage my mad folly. But it only made me worse. That very coldness and hauteur were as fuel to the flame. I longed to make her drop her icy mask. I longed to know that a woman's heart could beat and throb beneath that marble exterior. I longed to believe that, hopeless as my own passion was, it yet could move and touch her

"Did you succeed ?" asked Cecil gently as he paused.

"Only too well. There was another admirer of hers, who rivalled me in idiocy, but not in temerity. He was an old man, of high rank and notorious infamy—a man unscrupulous and powerful, whose influence was great, whose wealth greater. What network of infamy he wreathed around her I cannot tell. I only know that poisoned whispers and mysterious scandals circulated through the circles she had so long adorned, that one by one her women friends forsook her, and the men grew less respectful in her presence, more boastful out of it. The proud, beautiful woman, who had held her own so royally, whose mind and heart were pure as a child's, was classed among the sisterhood of vice and shame ; and he

the man whose name and honour she had kept so faithfully, was the first to credit the reports of evil and forsake her."

"The craven hound!" muttered Cecil, clenching his strong young fist in honest indignation at the picture those words represented—the picture of the lovely woman hunted down by calumny, forsaken by friends, deserted even by the man whose lawful duty it was to protect and shield her.

"You may well say that," said Lord Danvers. "It would have fared ill with him if I had come across him then; it will fare a thousand times worse if I ever come across him now!"

His face was very dark, his voice very grave, as he resumed his story.

"It seems to me that there are men to whom a wife's honour is naught; perhaps because they have so utterly forgotten their own. In any case this man left her to bear, as best she could, the unmerited opprobrium of the world, whose idol she had ever been; and it was then, Cecil—then, in my great intense pity and my just indignation—that I for once dropped the veil and bared my long-hidden feelings to her eyes; then that I lost prudence, judgment, self-control, and besought her to make herself what the world believed her to be."

"And her answer?"

"She did not scorn me, upbraid me, as she might justly have done; she—how well I remember it now, to this hour!—she only raised a white sad face from her hands and said these words:

"'Have I fallen so low as this?'"

"Cecil, I felt choked, ashamed, stunned—so high above me she stood in her simple purity, so low beneath her I lay in my selfish passion. For a moment neither of us spoke. Then she rose and gently bade me follow her. She led the way up the softly-carpeted staircase to a suite of rooms I had never entered. In one stood a tiny cot; lace and azure hangings closed it round. She beckoned me to approach, and, drawing back the curtains, she showed me the fairest sight I think I ever beheld. Two tiny infants lay sleeping there. Their faces were exactly alike; the gold, flossy curls framed in their delicate beauty, and long dark lashes rested on their cheeks. I looked at them in astonishment. Then she closed the curtains, and said very gently:

"'Their father is my husband. A wife *may* forget her duty; a mother—never!'"

"I give you my word, Cecil, I could have knelt at her feet and cried like a child at that moment. I had loved her with a boy's unreasoning passion when I sought her side that night; I left her with a man's, most perfect reverence and

respect. It is the old story, Cis, of lives that met too late ; but if I know anything of myself, I know this—that I shall never love living woman again, though my years reach twice the allotted span of human life !”

“And her fate ?” asked Cecil gently.

“It is that which has brought me to Paris now,” was the calm reply ; and as he spoke he drew a letter from his breast. “This reached me a few days ago when I was in the Tyrol. It had been long delayed, owing to the constant changes of my address. It contains her last words, Cis ; it leaves me a charge I would have come from the world’s end to undertake—the charge of her children, the little twin girls she showed me on that memorable night I last saw her. It appears from this that her husband is dead ; her only living relation is her sister, who has now gone on the stage, and whom, on that account solely, she dare not entrust with the welfare and bringing up of her daughters. She beseeches me, by the memory of that sad and pain-filled past, to look after the poor forsaken little creatures, and leaves me all her small fortune in charge for them. They are at present under the care of a peasant woman in Alsace—their foster-mother and nurse, with whom Valerie lived after her husband’s desertion. So it comes, Cis, that I am in Paris (where you stumbled across me yesterday) ; and so it comes that I felt strangely interested in your adventure with Thé d’Egmont. God preserve you, dear old fellow, from any such pain and sorrow as my acquaintance with her sister has given me.”

Cecil drew a long breath at the conclusion of his friend’s story. “It is quite a romance,” he said ; “like one of those chains of incidents and circumstances that unroll themselves in modern novels. It is little use to say I am sorry for you, Danvers ; words go for so little in a case like this. But I do thank you for your confidence, and I do feel for your grief now.”

Their hands met in a long silent clasp, and then with no more words they parted for the night, and went slowly up to their respective rooms.

But when Cecil was fast asleep, and dreaming the happy dreams of youth and carelessness, his friend still sat with his head resting on his hands and his eyes fixed on the fragment of paper that had brought him the last dying words of the woman he loved.

“To think that all that time she loved me !” he muttered to himself. “All that time, and I never knew it. To think that she has lived in penury and wretchedness, and died broken-hearted. My poor love !”

He raised his head impatiently, and paced to and fro with

restless steps. Life had given him so many great and precious gifts ; his name had the patent of nobility and the weight of wealth ; his years were still so young ; his powers and talents so great ; and yet——

Ah, that *yet* ! It has stood between mortals and the mirage of a happiness they never gain, since the sin of woman first brought its curse upon this weary earth.

CHAPTER III

“ OF MANY A CREED ”

By many a name—of many a creed
We have called upon them !

THE Hon. Cecil Calverley was the second son of the Earl of Strathavon.

They were a very old and very noble family, who had come over with William the Norman, and held large estates and princely fortunes, and lived with the state and luxury of princes, utterly regardless of debts incurred or of ruin in prospect. A race reckless and prodigal, as many a noble and haughty English race are, with a wonderful magnificence in the routine of their daily life, and a profuse prodigality that slowly but surely pointed to one end. The eldest son was the idol of his father, now an old enfeebled man of some seventy years. Cecil was no favourite of the old lord's. For one thing he was utterly different from either of his brothers. He studied the canons of art, not the rules of society ; thought horses not worthy of comparison with books ; neither betted at racecourses nor gambled at Kursaals ; had taken high honours at Cambridge instead of incurring heavy debts ; preferred claret to champagne, and water to either ; refused to smoke, because he saw no good in making a chimney of one's mouth, and considered the habit uncleanly ; had his rooms furnished with quattrocento chairs and rare bronzes, and hung with mezzotint prints instead of cup favourites ; and old deep hued paintings instead of ballet-dancers, and loved the gleam of marble statues and the glow of summer flowers better than the meretricious charms of azure and rose-coloured satins and gilded upholstery of modern fashion.

A strange young man, people thought. His tastes so odd, his views so strong, and his mind so firm that none could shake it in a determination once formed, it was little wonder that his father could not “ get on with him,” as he said ; little wonder that his brothers so often mocked and ridiculed his ways, views, and opinions.

Two things possessed his mind—a passionate love, which almost amounted to adoration, for art; and a feverish unrest, which led him to wander hither and thither, from country to country, and city to city, as the fancy seized him.

He had one friend—Lord Danvers, a direct contrast to himself, as somehow one's greatest friends so often are—a lazy, good-tempered, languid-looking man, who was wildly extravagant, and had all the fashionable vices which Cecil had not, and yet was dearer to his heart than any other living being saving perhaps his own young brother Harcourt.

Lord Danvers, who was the only son of the Marquis of Clevedon, had been at Eton and the University at the head of one of the fastest sets when Cecil was a mere boy; had afterwards entered the Guards, and left it in some half-dozen years because he complained "he had exhausted all the excitement, and the dressing was such a bore, and there was so little use in making love to ladies-in-waiting on Drawing-room days, when one woman was just like another."

He held matrimony in great horror, doubtless because he was known to be such a great "catch" that dowagers and fortune-hunters never let him rest in peace; and he confided to his friends that his life was made a terror to him by the overhanging dread that, despite all his care, someone would manage to marry him one day. Yet, despite languor, and affectation, and wildness, there was sterling stuff in him, otherwise Cecil Calverley would never have cared for him so much as he did.

With all Cecil's peculiar views, as most men termed them, he was in no way intolerant of those who held different opinions or indulged in different habits. Though cigar and pipe rarely touched his own lips, he never objected to sitting in a smoking-room, and joining in laugh, or jest, or anecdote, even though the air was heavily weighted with pungent odours and his eyes were half-blinded with the fog of tobacco-smoke, and his ears rather bored by the incessant chatter of betting; and he did consider in his own mind that "Take the field bar one," "A cross on the old strain," "Fastest thing I ever did; found and killed in barely three-quarters," "What do you think of Charlie's shoulders?" "Lost a monkey on Dog-star," "Won a clear two thou' on Ranger," and such-like odds and ends of conversation were not of the most interesting or intellectual description; but then Cecil was always so odd.

Another of his peculiarities was, that although his family were strict Roman Catholics, he had, from the age of fourteen, strenuously refused to follow the doctrines of that church, or give any obedience to its priestly authorities. This resolution and defiance of all precedent in one of the Strathavon race

and blood made him an object of dislike to many of the zealous fraternity of Holy Mother Church, and gave rise to many involuntary thanksgivings that the wilful young heretic was not the heir. But though Cecil had shaken off the trammels of one religion, he seemed in no haste to adopt another. A faith once disturbed is the hardest of all to satisfy, and he sought through the doctrines of Mohammedans, Jews, Hindoos, Sagas, Atheists, Pantheists, Greeks, and Protestants, without having in any case discovered a satisfactory anchorage for his troubled soul to rest in.

"If only there were no creeds!" he sighed one day to his *fidus achates*, after a lengthy and troubled discussion on some vexed point of doctrine.

"What would you have, then?" asked Lord Danvers.

"An universal tolerance, and a simple faith in the one Supreme Being—that is enough."

"For the believer, yes—but what for priests and pontiffs—would you abolish them?"

"Most decidedly. It is they who do all the mischief, turning religion into a mass of forms, legends, symbolism—veiling the Deity with unapproachable awe—making themselves mediators between man and his Creator—teaching us that the Word as they interpret or preach it is best for our understandings, and giving outward and visible shape to what is really pure and impalpable, a sacredness for the soul to feel, not a symbolism for the body to worship."

Holding views so opposed to the long-held standards of his family, and so contrary to priestly dictation, it was little wonder that Cecil was an object of suspicion and dislike to both. Yet he cared, or seemed to care, but little. Beside his passion for art and his love of freedom, all other things looked mean and contemptible and of small account. His sunny, genial temperament had been sorely tried by stern discipline at home and much mockery and ridicule abroad.

Both had had but one effect. They made him more reserved and self-contained than his youth seemed to warrant, but they in nowise altered his opinions or changed his belief. The love he would have lavished on his home circle had been checked and repressed even in childhood, but it made him none the less tolerant in his feelings for others—none the less faithful in friendship—generous in trust.

Père Jerome, who was private confessor at Strathavon Castle, and officiated at grand ceremonials in the noble Gothic-built chapel, and had his own private apartments, and came and went as he wished, with none to question him, and fared sumptuously and richly with little trouble, though with

infinite benefit to himself, this priestly divine held the second son of the family he served in extreme abhorrence.

How could it be otherwise, when he was a hee-tic and a scoffer and a thorough disbeliever in all religious observances, and called a high mass arrant nonsense, and asked, even when quite a child, whether prayers said in a garment with a red cross on it were more acceptable to God than those said when the same article of attire was decorated with gold or brodered with purple, or left off altogether? "What could be said of such a boy or expected of his future?" asked the saintly confessor in righteous indignation. Had he not also views utterly unheard of with regard to confession, which he called an impious and degrading practice, and utterly without justification from biblical authority—a doctrine taught and encouraged by the Church of Rome for the sole purpose of rearing her converts and disciples in abject submission to her authority and credulous obedience to the will of her priests!

Père Jerome, in the sanctity of his velvet-hung, chastely-decorated little chamber, said and thought many a fierce and vindictive thing of this reprobate branch of a goodly tree; yet he was never in any way discourteous to him. He knew better than to exchange a silken glove for a steel gauntlet, and deemed affability and gentleness surer ministers of craft than harsh denunciation or outspoken rage. So he said, being a wise man in his generation, and having many saintly and noble examples to follow.

In his own heart he knew that he would a thousand times sooner have seen young Cecil wild, reckless, profligate, than what he was. He had absolutely no vice which priestcraft could turn to account. The impoverished fortunes of his family suffered little at his hands; gambling he abhorred; extravagance he avoided; to women he was utterly indifferent seeing always in paintings and statuary a loveliness far beyond ball-room flippancy and modern artifice and fashionable unreality and unfashionable vulgarism. So dreaming his own dreams, building up his own theories, living his own life contentedly, Cecil was alike careless of the ridicule he aroused or the anger he provoked.

Père Jerome, however, with his Jesuitical policy and his relentless heart, neither forgot nor forgave the rash boy who had opposed his doctrines in youth and spurned his authority in manhood. The other members of the family treated this eccentric second son as a person to be ridiculed or pitied—but of small account either way. Not so the priest. He knew that but two lives—one old and feeble, the other mad and reckless—lay between Cecil and the power that had so long lain in the hands of himself and his predecessors. At any

moment the law of Nature or the curse of accident might place him at the head as the holder of the family honours, and vested with lawful right to do what he chose.

Père Jerome knew instinctively that that right would make him of small account in the eyes of a man too keen-sighted to be a tool, and yet too indifferent to declare himself an enemy.

His mind was busied with such thoughts as these one morning, when he obeyed a summons to visit the Earl in his private apartments.

As he entered the aged man rose and bent before him with a courtly grace still his own, despite a weight of years and a frame ravaged by bodily pain.

"You sent for me, my son?"

The suave, courteous tones betrayed no curiosity, although the mind of the speaker was full of surprise at the unwonted summons.

"I sent for you, father; yes. Be seated, I pray."

A momentary pause ensued. Then the Earl spoke.

"I have received a communication from abroad that has somewhat puzzled me. It is in an unknown handwriting, and states that my son Cecil has placed a child at a certain conventual home in the south of France; that he has charged himself with its maintenance and support; that he insists on having free access to it at all times when inclination prompts; that his statements as to when and how he discovered it are of the vaguest, though his interest and concern respecting its welfare are quite singular in their disinterestedness. What do you think of this?"

A slight smile curled the lips of the attentive priest.

"Think? Why, that it shows that Mr. Cecil is, after all, but human. There is more hope for him when he takes to committing peccadilloes, instead of preaching against them."

"Then you are of opinion——"

"That he is no better than the rest of his sex, my lord."

"But surely you don't suppose that he has been fool enough to foist a bastard on the care of these people, and charge himself with its future——"

"He may have married. There are pretty *paysannes* enough in the sunny land where he has so long wandered."

"Now, by all the saints of heaven!" shouted the old man fiercely, "if I thought that, I would disown him on the spot! A *mésalliance* in our family is a thing unknown."

"Mr. Cecil is unlike your family in most things—singularly unlike."

"For God's sake, don't insinuate that horrible doubt again!" cried the old man, with a sudden pitiful pleading in

his voice. "You know what it has cost me all these years. You know how it has sapped all youth and vigour from my heart since first I listened to its poisoned whispers. I have wooed so many; but *she* alone of all the world I—*loved!*"

He spoke of his wife—the fair young bride he had worshipped in his fiery impulsive manhood. The woman who had sat at his board, and ruled his house, and borne his sons; and yet, despite all her gentleness and all his devotion, had ever been so cold, and passionless, and sad. Yet never a doubt of her truth nor a suspicion of her fidelity had crossed his mind till the first tiny seed, dropped by a careless word of Père Jerome's, had taken root and borne a whole poisonous harvest with a rapidity as startling as it was terrible.

None knew of it save himself and the counsellor to whom he unveiled all the inmost secrets of his life, and bared the depths of his tortured heart; and he—because it so well suited his ends and so gradually shaped itself to his purposes,—*he* soothed but to inflame, and calmed but to encourage.

"Do not excite yourself, my lord," he said gently; "it is unadvisable in your present state of health. I regret that I ever drew your attention to a fact which had long been plain to my own eyes. Think of it no more. After all, he is not your heir."

"Thank Heaven, no! If only Malden would marry and put an end to all my fears touching the succession. A——"

"It is a pity Mr. Cecil has none of the soldier blood of his race," insinuated the priest; otherwise there is such a field for glory in foreign service."

The old man looked at him with a grim smile.

"You will surely wear the Red Hat ere you die, holy father. How skilfully you play with words! One would hardly dream that your sentence conveys an easy and unexceptionable method of getting rid of an obnoxious interloper!"

A dusky red coloured the clear olive of the priest's smooth cheek. He waved his delicate white hand with a Frenchman's expressive grace.

"Nay, my lord; I merely think it a pity that one of your blood should waste time in trifling with art, and spend more money on secret intrigues than either of his brothers do in open day."

The old Earl's face clouded. His eyes flashed fire.

"Tell me what you know!" he said sternly.

"He is a contumacious son of the Holy Church; nevertheless, I would we could lead him back to the fold," said Père Jerome, with unctuous, silken voice. "I met him in France

last autumn, roaming through the woods of R——, with a knapsack strapped to his back and a child in his arms."

"A child! Why did you not tell me?"

The priest shrugged his shoulders.

"My lord, in our office we see and hear much. We say little."

"What did he say to you?"

"He told me a romantic story of having found a child in the woods, and of his intention to protect and adopt it. I thought the resolve singular, but then, Mr. Cecil——"

He paused, and looked meaningly at his companion.

"Yes, yes; I know," said the old lord impatiently. "Quixotism incarnate! So you knew the story, and never told me. I suppose some one from the convent has written this?"

He pointed to the letter, but his eyes rested searchingly on the smooth handsome face before him. It neither changed nor moved beneath his scrutiny.

"Doubtless," he said calmly; then added with a musing gravity: "It is strange that, with his horror for the Church and everything pertaining to it, he should have chosen such a refuge for his—I mean the—child."

The old Earl laughed his caustic, bitter laugh.

"He is unstable as the winds; he has no settled doctrine or belief. He may, as like as not, veer round again, and be as staunch a zealot as—*yourself*, holy father."

The sneer touched the priest, despite his impassive appearance.

"I would such a day might dawn," he said gently, and veiling skilfully the anger he felt. "How gladly would our blessed Church welcome back again the return of so erring a son."

"I would gladly vest all parental rights in Mother Church; she, at least, can claim her sons for her own. If we only knew as much!"

"Stay, my son; do not seek for cause to embitter you against this hapless youth. Even if his mother did wed you while her heart was given to another, at least you may be sure one so gentle and so pure could never have erred. Your honour was in safe keeping."

"Peace!" cried the old man fiercely, while the habitual saturnine gloom deepened on his face and his hands shook as with palsy. "Whatever she was, she is dead; and I—I loved her."

The fierce self-torture of a jealous nature reigned in his heart, and maddened him with suspicions that nothing could set at rest, for she whose holy purity he shamed by doubts could neither answer nor assuage them. These feelings had

coloured his whole conduct towards his son ever since his boyhood—ever since the horrible suspicion had first been breathed to him that, though Cecil was so unlike any of the Strathavon race, he strongly resembled a distant relation of his mother's house, to whom her heart had been given long ere the Earl had made her his wife.

There was no ground for such jealousy or doubt, and the old Earl was both proud and just; but, nevertheless, the seed, fostered and nourished by continual hints, grew into a rank and poisonous plant, whose roots turned his best feelings into bitterness, and implanted in his heart a fierce and unnatural dislike to his innocent son.

"What does your lordship intend to do in this matter?" asked Father Jerome, after a somewhat lengthy silence.

"Do? Nothing," said the Earl, rousing himself from his gloomy abstraction. "What is it to me if Cecil choose to adopt twenty beggars and bring them up? As for its being his own, that I don't quite believe. Whatever his faults, that of loving women is singularly remarkable by its absence."

The priest bit his lip. The game was not turning out quite as he wished.

"No; I don't think he would err in that way. He would think it more meritorious a thousand times to marry a peasant than betray one."

"And when he does *that* he has seen the last of me," said the old Earl with grim satisfaction. "I cast him off for ever."

"Have you the power, my lord?"

"I will *make* it!"

For a moment there flashed into his eyes the old untamed spirit which had fired his race in many a terrible conflict—in many a bloody war; arrogant, cruel, indomitable as the will that gave utterance to the words. He who heard them smiled quietly and gently to himself.

In his heart he prayed that the power might soon be put into execution—in his heart, too, he resolved that no means should be left untried to draw the despised son into the net he himself was forming for his heedless feet.

CHAPTER IV

"ASK THE WORLD WHO I AM"

Weaving the web of days that wove
Your doom, Faustine.

"You will come with me to call on Mdlle. D'Egmont?" said Lord Danvers to his friend the morning after the fire as they met at breakfast.

Cecil looked rather disconcerted. "I would much rather not," he said reluctantly; I shall only be in the way of your conversation. No; do go by yourself, Vere; I will await the issue of the interview here."

"In the way—nonsense!" laughed Lord Danvers. "No, no; you must come. Besides, you owe the lady a visit after her invitation and your gallant services. You are not bashful surely, Cis?"

"Hardly likely, at my age. Nevertheless, I do feel a strange reluctance to pursuing my acquaintance with Mdlle. D'Egmont. I wish you would yield to my wishes for once."

"My dear fellow, presentiments and prejudices are a mistake—the influence either of indigestion or too much wine. I have set my mind on your coming, so be rational and do what I ask."

"Of course, if you make such a strong point of it, I must obey," laughed Cecil, rising from his seat. "I know of old that I come off second best when arguing against your persuasions."

But when, a short time afterwards, he found himself in the dainty perfumed boudoir of the beautiful actress, he forgot all about prejudices and presentiments in a feeling of genuine admiration for the woman who greeted him with such flattering and self-evident pleasure.

"You must allow me to introduce my friend, Lord Danvers," said Cecil presently. "He has called upon you on a matter of some importance."

Mdlle. D'Egmont looked up in surprise, and met the cold calm gaze fixed upon her.

"I am quite at your service, monsieur," she said, in the clear sweet tones of a voice trained to express every shade of emotion, every note in the gamut of human feeling and human passions.

"Permit me to first inquire whether you have quite recovered from the alarm you experienced last night?" said Lord Danvers. "What a terrible thing that fire was!"

"Yes," she said, with a shudder, as the memory of the scene flashed across her. "Ah, monsieur,"—and she turned once more to Cecil—"but for you, what might not have been my fate! I have not ceased to think of your bravery; but I feel I can never speak my gratitude sufficiently."

"Pray do not mention the subject any more," said the young man, colouring hotly at her words. "I did no more than any other man would have done in my place. I am glad I happened to be so near the stage, that is all."

He glanced entreatingly at Lord Danvers, as if asking him to interpose now between the actress's gratitude and his own

reluctant acceptance of it. His friend was not slow to take the hint.

"Madame," he said, "in order not to trespass any longer on time which must be so valuable, allow me to acquaint you with the business that brings me here. In the first place will you kindly read this letter?"

"From Valerie! This is her handwriting," exclaimed Mdlle. D'Egmont in surprise. "Did you, then, know my poor sister, monsieur?"

"Yes—many years ago," he answered sadly.

Mdlle. D'Egmont's eyes ran rapidly over the sheet of paper in her hand. Then she uttered a hasty exclamation.

"Guardian of her children!—but that is impossible."

She turned back and looked at the date of the letter.

"Ah, this was written long ago, I see! My poor sister. She little knew that she was in error believing her husband to be dead. It was his friend and villainous associate, Paul Leroux, who was killed at San Francisco. Gaspard Ducroix still lives. He was here in Paris in the autumn."

Lord Danvers' face grew troubled at her words. "And the children?" he asked.

"They are with their father, I believe. He insisted on knowing where they were, and I had no resource but to give him the address in Alsace. I begged him to write and tell me of their welfare, but I have heard nothing."

"How long ago was this?"

"About four months, I think. It was late in the autumn, I know; and soon after I had a letter from Manon Bris, their foster-mother, saying the little ones had been removed from her care by their father."

"He was scarcely the sort of man to burden himself with two young helpless children, I should imagine," remarked Lord Danvers thoughtfully. "Poor little things! I dread to think of them in the power of such a scoundrel. He is nothing better; even you, mademoiselle, must acknowledge that."

"I cannot deny it," she said sadly. "My poor sister's life was only one of long suffering and torture, yet even to me she never blamed him; she did her duty nobly and faithfully to the last!"

A rush of tears blinded her for a moment; hence she did not notice how pale the bronzed grave face before her grew at her words, nor how the firm lips trembled as he turned hurriedly away.

Cecil came to the rescue then.

"It is a sad story, mademoiselle," he said gently; "but your sister has left a noble example of womanly fortitude and endurance, and let us hope she is happier now!"

The beautiful woman dashed the tears from her eyes and struggled for composure. "She had need be," she said at last, "if there is any truth in the law of compensation."

"I fear, then, I can do nothing in the matter now," said Lord Danvers, joining abruptly in the conversation. "Of course the father is their lawful guardian. At best I can but watch over their interests from a distance. If it ever lies in my power to assist or aid them I shall never hesitate. And now, Mdlle. D'Egmont, as a last favour, will you give me the address of this nurse in Alsace—what is her name?"

"Manon Bris. Certainly, monsieur; I will give you her letter, if you like. It contains some account of my poor Valerie's life during those last sad months, when even I knew little of her illness or her grief."

She moved away to an *escritoire* at the farther end of the room as she finished speaking, and presently returned with a letter in her hand.

"It is written by a village priest," she said, as she gave it to Lord Danvers. "It will give you the particulars of this *lawful* abduction, and you can follow up the clue at your own leisure. I need hardly say that any news respecting my little nieces will be very welcome to me."

"Be assured you shall have it when in my power to give," answered Lord Danvers, as he put the letter in his pocket-book. "And now, mademoiselle, accept my thanks for your kindness in entrusting me with this mission, and permit us to say adieu! I fear we have trespassed too long already on your valuable time."

"Not at all," she said with a smile. "I fear that I shall have more at my disposal than I shall know how to while away. The destruction of the theatre will of course put an end to the performances at present."

"Do you always act in *opéra bouffe*?" inquired Cecil.

"No," she answered, a sudden flush of colour springing to her face. "I prefer comedy; but suitable engagements are not always to be had, and one must often take what one can get, not what one likes."

"Yet, for Art's sake, is it not best to be true to oneself?"

"Ah, monsieur," said the beautiful actress with a faint sigh, "words like those are easy—for a man. A woman who stands alone in the world, and has to fight her battles single-handed, has as little chance of being true to herself as she has of gaining the world's sympathy or—its credence."

"I should scarcely imagine the world had dealt hardly with you, mademoiselle," said Cecil gravely.

Again that deep pained flush rose to her brow; her eyes fell.

"Perhaps not, in a certain sense," she answered. "But I cannot explain, monsieur, and you cannot judge."

Lord Danvers had moved away, and was deeply engrossed in the study of a delicately-finished engraving on the wall. The actress glanced hurriedly at him, then her eyes turned to the handsome frank young face beside her.

"Have you been long in Paris, monsieur?" she asked; and it seemed to Cecil Calverley that her voice was less certain in its ring—more tremulous in its soft sweet tones.

"I have but just arrived," he answered, a little surprised by the abrupt question.

"And—pardon my curiosity—did you come to the theatre last night to see me or the piece?"

"Well, to speak the honest truth," laughed Cecil, "we went from no motive at all. We saw the crowd, and went in with it. I have been a stranger to Paris so long, mademoiselle, that your fame had not yet reached me."

"I am glad of that," she exclaimed eagerly, a look of relief passing over her expressive face. "Monsieur, I owe you my life. I can never hope to repay the debt, and to thank you I can find no words; but I fear a day may come when you will think that a life so worthless but little merited the perils you braved. Yet, even in that day, believe my gratitude will never be less, nor my memory of you unfaithful. These are only words—idle words, you may deem; but some day you will know why I spoke them, why I am glad that we met as strangers."

"To part as friends, I trust," said Cecil, gallantly, a little puzzled by her agitated manner. "And to meet——"

"To meet! Ah, perhaps, no more!" she answered. "Even though between us lies the tie of a rescued life—the deathless memory of a bravely-earned gratitude."

"Pray forget my service. It does not merit such praise or such remembrance. As for meeting no more, that, I trust, will not be the case. But if it be too great an honour to be admitted to the circle of your friends, I shall still follow your course with vivid interest. The profession you grace is, fortunately for me, one which can never let my memory be as faithless as you seem to imagine."

She made no answer; only held out her hand in silence, and looked at him with eyes strangely soft and sad.

"Adieu, mademoiselle," said the young Englishman, bending low over the fair white hand, extended so graciously. "And will you not retract your words? 'No more' seems such a cruel decree after to-day."

"It will not seem cruel to you long," she answered, all the warmth and softness of her face gone now, and replaced by a

cold and cynical smile. "Ask the world who I am before you couple my name with that of friendship. And now, once more, adieu."

There was no gainsaying that firm dismissal. With her strange words still ringing in his ears, Cecil Calverley found himself in the street once more, and, turning abruptly to Lord Danvers, he demanded :

"Who is this Mdlle D'Egmont? Do you know anything of her?"

"No," answered his friend in surprise. "But I can soon learn. The Count de Besançon is coming to dine with us to-night. He is perfectly *au fait* with every Paris scandal, and acquainted with every notoriety. We will ask him about her if you desire it."

"Yes, I do. Something she said has puzzled me exceedingly."

"Don't lose your heart to her," said Lord Danvers jestingly. "She certainly is most beautiful, and her gratitude to yourself was displayed very touchingly. Still——"

"Don't be a fool, Danvers," broke in Cecil, with an anger and impatience that were born of his own uncomfortable feelings and vague suspicions. "Lose my heart!—I?"

"With what superb disdain you say that," laughed his friend. "And are you to be the only invulnerable target for the shafts of the little blind god?"

Cecil shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose I shall meet my fate some day, like everyone else," he answered with good-humoured contempt. "But may the powers that be keep *that* day far off! I have no desire to make its acquaintance."

After dinner that night, in the fashionable café where the three men met, Lord Danvers put the question to the Count de Besançon which Cecil had been longing yet dreading to hear. Their guest was a middle-aged Frenchman, courteous, witty, well-informed—a man whose life had been somewhat reckless, yet whose vices had never been too pronounced, even as his virtues had been ever laughingly gainsaid.

"Thé D'Egmont, the actress!" he exclaimed, as Lord Danvers' question arrested him in the act of pouring some brandy into his cup of *café noir*. "Know her? Well, not personally; though it is as much as my reputation is worth to acknowledge so humiliating a fact. Only she is not called by the name you mention in Paris. Surely, you have heard of Faustine?"

CHAPTER V

'BE THOU CHASTE AS ICE, PURE AS SNOW, THOU SHALT NOT
ESCAPE CALUMNY"

A MOMENTARY silence followed Count Besançon's words. It was broken by Lord Danvers. "I must confess my ignorance," he said, "I have been abroad so long that I am unacquainted with the celebrities of *les deux mondes de Paris*. I suppose, though, there is not much doubt as to which of them the lady in question belongs."

Cecil's face changed. The Count laughed good-humouredly. "Doubt? Well, hardly, I should say. Her beauty her coquetries, her extravagances, have been the talk of all Paris. The burning of this theatre will but add fresh laurels to her fame. Her own narrow escape and the fear that they might have lost their idol will make people rush after her more than ever."

"Has she been on the stage long?"

"She came out about a twelvemonth ago, then took a freak into her head and refused to act. Gave out she was ill, and used to drive in the Bois every day, out of bravado. She is a perfect incarnation of caprice, and as uncertain as the winds of heaven."

"And how did she gain so ominous a pseudonym?" inquired Lord Danvers. Cecil was quietly listening to the conversation, and made no attempt to join in it.

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "An artist painted her—it was a strange picture. Created a *furor* in the salon. She insisted on his calling it that, and most people have given her the title ever since."

"And she lives up to the character?"

"I cannot say that. It is the strangest thing the way that woman plays fast and loose with her reputation, and yet—well, I have heard many a man declare that she is innocent with it all. Her name has never been coupled with any other. With all her follies and extravagances there are plenty who believe in her—numbers who adore her. She is a mystery in fact, and one whose meaning is not to be easily elucidated."

"A strange account, indeed," remarked Lord Danvers thoughtfully. He remembered Valerie, and what the world had said of her. How few save himself had had any belief in her purity—any respect for her womanhood! Was her sister to suffer in like manner? "She is very beautiful," he remarked presently.

"Take care, milord," laughed the Frenchman. "One would think you had also fallen a victim to her fascinations. I suppose you have seen her act?"

"Yes, and consider her talents wasted on the rubbish she performs."

"Many think so beside yourself. I, for my part, believe tragedy is her *forte*. You should hear her recite—*ma foi! c'est superbe, ça!*"

"If it were her *forte*, as you say," remarked Cecil Calverley, abruptly striking into the conversation, "she would surely never do herself the injustice of performing so inferior a *rôle* as the one we witnessed."

The Count shrugged his shoulders. "She is a woman—she is full of caprices—and she loves money. What pays best now? Burlesque and opéra bouffe. So she accepts them; besides, what an opportunity for costume! You forget that. To a woman like the Faustine you could scarcely offer a greater inducement. All Paris went to see her as a water-lily."

"She is no actress, then?"

"*Cela dépend*. What she chooses to do and what she can do are two very different things. But she has one great merit. Let her play what she may, be it ever so trivial a part, she can always forget *herself*. There are few who can do that now."

"True," said Lord Danvers. "Therein lies the only perfection of acting and its rarest achievements. Still I should think there was scarcely much scope for it in personating—a water-lily."

The Count laughed.

"You may not think so; the public did. After all, genius does not pay half so well as adaptability. Probably Faustine is wise in her generation, and knows this. She wanted to make herself the rage by one lightning stroke. She succeeded. She has gained all she desired. *Au reste*, she can please herself for the future. To become a great tragic actress is a slow, toilsome, and wearisome life. For success—one slips into it easily enough by the open portals of opéra bouffe!"

"After all, it is the fault of the public," interposed Cecil Calverley. "Genius is thrown away nowadays. They want realism in every branch of art, and realism means only too often vulgarity. We shall have Venus painted next in real lace and diamonds."

"As Venus Victrix—emblematic of modern society," laughed Lord Danvers. "What is your opinion, Count? Have intelligence and taste entirely disappeared? And are we

to have a fashion in art as well as in our houses and our toilets?”

“And why not?” interrogated the Frenchman. “Would you have art always the same? All that is greatest and most glorious has been done. We shall never have another Michael Angelo, or Raphael, or Titian. Beethoven can own no rival; Shakespeare no equal; modern society is too frivolous for grandeur—too rapid for the slowly-ripening achievements of greatness; life is all rush and hurry-scurry now; novelty and excitement are the greatest charms that art, or literature, or the drama, can bring to their respective works.”

“You are right, I believe, and your words apply to our nation equally well. Shakespeare has found his rival in Offenbach, and I doubt if our greatest authors have met with half the success that attends a modern French novelist.”

“Which brings us back to the same point. It is the fault of the age; the demand always creates the supply. If public taste has degenerated, our artists, and writers, and actors must give it what it craves, or starve. Even the sublimity of genius prefers a full platter to an empty one, I should imagine.”

“That sounds horribly matter-of-fact,” said Cecil. It may be true, but it is painful all the same. One hates to think of great gifts wasted and talents squandered in pandering to the vulgar multitude. Art alone can ennoble the world; it should never sink to the degradation of encouraging human vices.”

“When art has empty pockets it can scarcely be blamed for trying to fill them,” remarked Lord Danvers. “You are still at the age of illusions, my dear Cecil. It is so easy to talk when you are not—hungry.”

“I cannot believe the world so ungrateful as to ignore what is really meritorious.”

“My dear boy, the world is generally in too great a hurry to look below the surface of anything. Besides, it saves so much trouble to accept things as they are; not try to make them wiser, greater, better.”

Cecil shook his head.

“We are not all fools surely,” he said with contempt. “In no age, at no time, has education been of such paramount importance. Where are its benefits if vulgarity, indecency, and show are supposed to represent popular taste?”

“I am speaking of your country,” remarked the Count de Besançon. “The very fact of educating people too severely tends to make them less critical as regards the amusements that fill their hours of relaxation.”

"Well, there is something in that," laughed Lord Danvers. "But now we have drifted from the subject in question. Is Mdlle. Faustine answerable for this argument? I was going to ask you——"

"Pardon me, Danvers," interrupted Cecil somewhat haughtily. "As that lady's name has dropped out of our discussion, pray let it remain there. I feel no interest in the impure scandals that play with a woman's reputation."

Lord Danvers looked astonished. The Frenchman smiled.

"You are particular, monsieur," he said ironically. "A woman with the reputation of the Faustine must expect to be discussed in all classes of society. I should think it was not often either that she found a champion like yourself."

"My friend is very young," said Lord Danvers with an indulgent smile. "He thinks all women angels still. You and I, Count, as men of the world, are beyond such an idyllic belief; but, upon my soul, if we spoke truth, I believe we should say we envied him it."

"I believe you are right," answered his friend after a moment's pause. "Ah, youth—youth—how beautiful you are and how fleet! *Par Dieu!* what would I not give to be young once more, and look at life with eyes of faith instead of disgust and disappointment!"

"How often have I heard that wish expressed," said Cecil Calverley. "I wonder when my time will come to echo it?"

"Not for long, I hope," hurriedly muttered Lord Danvers.

"Not till you waste your heart on a woman like—the Faustine," said the Count de Besangon with an odd little smile.

"Danvers," said Cecil, later on that evening, when their guest had left, and cards had been pushed aside and cigars taken the place of conversation, "I can't say I like your friend. He is not a married man, I suppose?"

"Oh yes he is."

"Then he ought to hold higher views of women, or more respectful. I felt disgusted with his conversation latterly."

"He is a Frenchman," said Lord Danvers dryly. "If you want a thorough good specimen of domestic bliss, my dear boy, study married life here. I have seen a good deal of it. The result is, I congratulate myself every day that I am—a bachelor."

"Don't be cynical, Danvers. If Valerie Ducroix had been Valerie D'Egmont, I doubt if you would have been able to boast of your freedom now."

A dark flush stained the young Englishman's face.

"Cecil," he said sternly, "as you value my friendship,

never jest on that subject ; it is the one thing I cannot stand."

"Pardon me," said Cecil, hastily ; "I did not mean to offend you. I should have respected your confidence better."

"You did not think I was so thin-skinned ; nor am I on any other topic. But her name is too sacred for a jest, even between us."

"It must be an odd thing to care so awfully for one single human being !" remarked Cecil musingly.

"Odd. You're right there. Unaccountable too. But we all do it sooner or later. Your turn will come, Cis !"

"I hope not," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders and laughing gaily. "I don't see why one shouldn't get on through life without a love-affair. It has been done."

"I doubt it. It may have been denied. It is not in human nature to *do*."

"Danvers, don't be offended, but you really are the very last person in the world I should have suspected of caring deeply for a woman ; least of all of keeping her memory in your heart for all these years."

"Aye, and I shall keep it for twice as many more. I met my fate, Cis, for the first time and the last."

"Do you not think it possible to love twice, then ?"

"Possible ?—oh yes ; a dozen times for some men !"

"But not for yourself !"

"Thank God, no !" he exclaimed with startling earnestness.

"I could never love any woman living, after *her*."

"What do you really think of the sister ? Is she at all like——"

"Like Valerie, you would say. As a star is like the sun, as a weed is like the rose, yes."

Cecil laughed.

"She is a very beautiful woman, say what you like," he remarked presently, "and totally different to my ideas of an actress."

"In that respect I agree with you. I hope her sister's example will be her guide through the dark insidious paths her feet will have to tread."

"I hate a public career for a woman," exclaimed Cecil, impatiently. "Authoresses, actresses, female artists, and female lecturers, are a class of beings I detest. Heaven forbid I should ever marry any one of them !"

"The man who cries out loudest against a creed is not always the one who refrains from following it," said Lord Danvers sententiously.

"You mean, I might change my opinion ?"

"I have known things more unlikely."

"Well, if I know anything of myself at all, I am quite sure I won't. Celebrity for a man is bad enough; for a woman it is simply detestable!"

"What extraordinary views, my dear boy! I can't say I, for one, agree with them. Fame is as the breath of life to most men. It is the mainspring of an artist's exertions, a musician's labours, a poet's dreams, a writer's perseverance. Without it as an incentive, genius would lose half its power, talent half its strength. If you choose to hide your light under a bushel, Cis, you are a singular exception; but even you must feel a thrill of pleasure when a certain unknown artist's paintings attract attention, invite criticism, or win praise. Confess it."

"I never read a critique, on my word of honour."

"What! so thin-skinned as all that?"

"No; my reasons are simple enough. If favourable, they might enervate me; if adverse, they might discourage. I paint for painting's sake. I love it, and it is of little consequence what the outside world, whether of ignorance or culture, think of my work."

"Or of you?"

"Of me still less. That is one great fault of the fame you laud. It is not of his creations so much as of his own name, his own skill, his own powers, that the artist thinks; and that fact is deleterious to art, even as it is injurious to its professors."

"Again, I don't agree with you. Ambition is the soul of an artist's genius. Were he content to be unknown, to live and die forgotten, he would be immeasurably the worse. If he craves eminence for himself, it is only that the fruits of his fancy, the ideals of his brain, the grand and glorious truths he tries to teach, may be immortal."

"With *his* name attached to them?"

"I see no harm in that. The honour and praise of our fellow-men will not injure any of us unless we are too weak-minded to bear the breath of popularity. But I won't argue any more with you; let us return to the first subject of discussion. I mean to go at once to Alsace. What do you do?"

"I will see you through your adventure, if possible. My time is my own still."

"Thanks. I shall be glad of your company. When do you intend to look after your little foundling again?"

"Well, I mustn't go too soon, I suppose, or the worthy *Sœurs de Secours* will be suspicious."

"Have you any idea where your friend the priest is now?"

"None whatever. I have often wondered what took him to France at that particular time."

"Business connected with his holy calling, you may be sure," said Lord Danvers, with a faint sneer. "Don't you believe it, Cis?"

"Not exactly. He is a Jesuitical spy, if there ever was one. In my own mind I believe he came to look after me and carry some of his sneaking reports back to my father."

"Phew"—w—w!" whistled Lord Danvers, "does the wind blow that way? That little dish of charity which you concocted, my dear boy, will look well when served up at the parental board with a priestly garnishment."

Cecil laughed outright.

"You don't suppose my father would believe him if he concocted such a monstrous story as that! Why, it has not the slightest ground for probability. In fact, the child must have been four or five years of age, judging from her appearance."

"Were she ten, Père Jerome would weave a romance out of that *rencontre* in the wood. Believe me, Cecil, you have not heard the end of your adventure by a long way yet."

Cecil looked grave for a moment. "It is not like you to croak," he said. "Come what may, I shall look after this poor little forsaken thing as long as——"

"Ye both shall live," quoted Lord Danvers solemnly.

"For shame! To bring in the marriage service is rather too bad. It is a curious coincidence though, that we should both be saddled with other people's children at the same time."

"I wish I had a chance of being 'saddled,' as you call it, with my poor Valerie's little ones. I fear that brute of a father will stand in my way."

"From all accounts he ought to be only too glad to get rid of them."

"But not to me. We were sworn foes of old. It seems odd—doesn't it?—that a man should treat his wife as he did, and yet be jealous of her?"

"There seems no accounting for the vagaries of the 'divine passion,'" laughed Cecil. "Thank Heaven, I am free from them all as yet."

"You might thank Heaven more if you were sure of remaining so," answered his friend grimly.

CHAPTER VI

THE CLUE LOST

WITH the next day's noon the two friends found themselves at the address given them by Mdlle. D'Egmont.

It was a tranquil, fragrant little farmhouse with gardens full of budding fruit trees, and climbing roses trained around the porch, and the hum of bees, and the coo of doves, and the faint lowing of cattle from the pastures ever coming to the ear. It had all the beauty of sylvan solitude, all the freshness and fragrance of woodland life, and the cheery, pleasant-spoken woman who was its mistress looked every way in keeping with its homeliness and quiet beauty.

She answered their questions with extreme readiness. She told them of Valerie's long illness and gentle patience, of the little helpless creatures she had left to her care, and whom she had taken to her own motherless breast with such tender love and care.

"They were to me as my own," she said, in the sweet singing voice that one hears so often among the French peasantry. "It seemed to me the Holy Mother had sent them in place of my own little one, who died just a year ago, messieurs, and she (the sweet gracious lady!) told me to guard and love them for her sake—the little blessed angels—and never to part with them till some day a good kind friend of hers should come with a letter, authorising me to place them in his charge—a letter written by herself when she lay dying here. Well, messieurs, they stopped with me and were happy, very happy, though they sometimes wept for their mother—the saints preserve her! But they were too young to know what her loss really meant; and they played at my hearth, and were so sweet and fair and lovable and tender that I loved them more and more as days went by. Well, one day—it was getting late in the autumn then—a man came marching boldly up to my door and demanded his children. His! *Bon Dieu!* I knew he was right. Had I not seen him in his grand Paris house when first my beautiful lady sent for me to take her babes? And she had told me he was dead long since. I knew not what to do—not then in my bewilderment—at first. Alas! he did not give me time to think for long. He seized upon all he could find—her few trinkets, her scanty possessions; and then he roughly bade me put together the children's clothes and bring them to him."

Here her voice broke into sobs, and for a time checked her narration. Cecil and his friend waited patiently till she was

calmer, though Lord Danvers' heart sank more and more at this recital; and his hopes of ever rescuing the poor little motherless creatures grew fainter and farther each moment.

"Messieurs will kindly excuse my grief," the good peasant woman presently resumed, "when I think of the little beautiful darlings, how they clung to me and cried, and begged me not to give them to that stern-faced man. Ah, it was pitiable; but I had no help for it. He took them away then and there; and when I begged him to let me have some word of how they were and where they went he only said it was no business of mine and that I should never hear aught from him—he had other things to do than write to one like me. I thought my heart would break when I saw the little trembling things go so timidly and tearfully away. My eyes were blind with the tears I shed; but he—he only laughed. Ah, the barbarous heart of stone—what does it not deserve!"

"Have you heard nothing of them since?" asked Lord Danvers.

"Nothing, monsieur."

"And you do not know what he proposed doing—where he meant to take them?"

She shook her head sadly. "I have told monsieur all I know. I wish, for my sake, it was more."

"Which route did they take—do you know?"

"The Paris road, monsieur. I understood he was to travel there by diligence. But he may have only said it, not meaning me to know whither he was bent. I cannot tell."

"You are sure he was their father—this man?"

"Sure! Holy Virgin, if only I could have doubted it I should be a happy woman now. No, monsieur, it was indeed Monsieur Ducroix that came, alive and well and hearty as yourself."

"Curse him," muttered Lord Danvers, with a fierce wrath in his voice and eyes that startled the woman as she heard. "The cowardly hound! so he stands in my way again. I wish our day of reckoning was at hand. It will be a bad one for him when it does arrive."

"You cannot interfere with a father's rights, Danvers," said Cecil gently. "Law is stronger than human feeling."

"If monsieur ever hears anything of the little angels, will he kindly tell me, their poor nurse?" asked the woman timidly. "If monsieur is the friend of whom my lady spoke, I am sure he will look after her poor helpless little ones for the sake of their sainted mother."

"That I will, depend on it," said Lord Danvers earnestly.

"And now, Cecil, as we have learnt all we can, there is

no use in remaining here any longer. I will follow up the clue, if possible, by ascertaining where this Ducroix went. A man and two children are not likely to pass through the country unnoticed."

"This amateur detective business promises to be exciting," said Cecil. "I am of your opinion, Danvers, it ought to be easy to trace them. Let us see if it can be done."

And having largely rewarded the faithful woman for her information, they bade her good-morning, and started off on the first stage of research.

CHAPTER VII

"SOLD INTO BONDAGE"

IN the public room of a wayside tavern, a black-browed gipsy-looking man was sitting, drinking. He had a box of wooden puppets by his side, and on the rude table at which he sat were the remains of his supper. A group of strolling actors were at the other end of the room hungrily discussing a huge dish of macaroni. Two handsome laughing girls sat on a bench, sharing a wine-cup between them. Two tiny children—girls—were crouching in a corner by the fire, weeping silently and sadly to themselves, and as little noticed by the other inmates of the room as were the dogs that slumbered at their feet.

Into the midst of this rough assemblage strode a man, carrying in his arms a child. He gave a careless nod, and glanced around as if in search of someone.

"Where is Giaccone?" he asked.

"He will be back presently," answered one of the girls. "Do you want him in such haste, amico?"

The man vouchsafed no answer; only loosed the scarlet wrapper from the child's little form, and roughly bade her join the group at the fire.

She crept to them timidly and shrinkingly, the little creatures making room for her directly, and looking with dim, wondering eyes at her delicate beauty, at the golden gleam of her long rich hair, and the satiny texture and peachlike bloom of her skin.

"Are you coming with us?" they asked her.

But she, not knowing the meaning of the liquid foreign words, only shook her graceful head, and looked at them with wide startled eyes, half frightened and half glad.

The man who had brought her threw himself down beside the others, and a good-tempered, dark-eyed woman brought him supper and set wine before him, as though he was an expected guest.

He ate but little, and that in utter silence, save for a motion of his hand towards the child and a hurried direction to the woman who served him to take her food also.

As he concluded his meal the door opened, and a man entered.

"Ah, Giaccone!"

"What! are you here already? You must have travelled fast, friend," was the answer to his eager exclamation. "Have you supped?"

"Yes; and you?"

"Am ready to keep my bargain. Where is the child?"

The man pointed to the group by the fire, and the newcomer's fierce eyes brightened as they took in the wonderful fairylike grace of the little crouching figure.

"Can she dance?" he asked.

"Not yet; but sings like a nightingale, and is quick and apt to learn."

"That is well."

"What is it you need with the child?" demanded the other, speaking in French, so that those around could not understand.

"You need not fear I mean her any harm. She shall be well cared for. I told you what I did with them long ago, amico—train them for the ballet. In this age there is constant demand for such articles. I prefer them young, they are so much less trouble; and I prefer them parentless, they are so much easier to manage. Now will you have the gold and sign the agreement?"

They went away together into an inner room and presently came out again.

"You will treat her kindly—you promise that," said the child's barterer as he stayed for an instant beside her.

"Have I not promised?"

"She is but a delicate little thing, not used to rough ways and words, you know."

"Do you repent your bargain, friend?"

"No—no. What could I do with a child——"

"Even your own——"

"How do you know that?" he said fiercely; "I told you I could find you such a one as you wanted, and I never believed the brat was my own."

"One of the disadvantages of possessing a beautiful wife, eh—friend?"

A dusky burning flush spread over the sombre, evil-looking face.

"Silence!" he muttered roughly. "What do you know? We may not meet again for long; when we do, look to it that you have kept your word as regards *her*."

And he strode away through the crowd with no other word or look.

The man Giacone, or as he was usually called, Già, bent down to the half-numbed child and took her up in his arms and sat her on the bench before him. She looked at him in terror, and her little frame trembled as his merciless glance took in all its grace and beauty.

"You'll do," he said roughly, in his own tongue. "A brave life's before you, little one. You shall be a dancing-dog for the nobles and princes of your own land. You will be handsome, that shows plain enough. Well, a woman's beauty is a mine of gold to herself. It won't be my fault if the training fails to fit you for the—race."

And with a low brutal laugh he summoned the woman and bade her take the children away and put them to bed.

"We have a long journey to-morrow," he said. "I go with them home!"

Home!

Had anyone there known what a mockery of that gentle word his lips had framed, they would have deemed it a truer kindness to stifle the life in their fragile childish bodies then and there, than to let them pass to the existence that waited them with the light of the morning sun!

"So Già is at his old tricks again," said the man with the puppets.

One of the girls looked quickly up. "He is not unkind to them—so they say," she answered; "and, after all, it is a fine life. The great dancers in the cities live like queens, and have jewels and beautiful clothes and carriages. I wish I were one—that I know."

The man laughed.

"True to your sex, Brunnotta, never content. You lead a merrier life than the dancing queens, believe me."

"How pretty that child was!" said the other girl thoughtfully. "The man who brought her was French, was he not?"

"Yes; I wonder how he came by her. She looked like a little lady."

"True; but that is no business of ours. Già knows what he is about."

Then they, too, went to their sleeping rooms. Long before they were up next morning Già and the children had left.

A strange, cruel life was that which followed for the child given over to Già's care. Long wearisome hours of training when the little limbs were tired and aching; blows and oaths and cruel words that dazed her bewildered brain;

scanty meals, and coarse food, and broken sleep from which she was roused and disturbed at the tyrant's whim ; a sordid toilsome mechanical existence, that left the little fragile body numbed and insensible and utterly wearied of the life that was only a burden.

She had been nicknamed Quità by her new protector, because he deemed her own name, Maraquita, too long and too fine, and she was known only by that among the wretched little beings whose misery she shared, and to the pale sad-faced woman, Già's wife, who used to tend the little forlorn creatures with a pitiful compassion that often brought punishment on herself, and whose nightly prayer to the saints was one of intense thanksgiving that they had never granted her long-past wish to have a child of her own ; and when a woman can be thankful for the withholding of *that* gift her life must be one of two things—utterly vile, or utterly wretched.

The woman Lisa was often black and blue with bruises, and hungered for want of food, and wearied with long toil, and yet she was gentle and uncomplaining, and did her best to shield the little parentless fledglings who had found so rough and cruel a nest, and to mitigate for them the terrors and sufferings she had known so long herself.

For, with the true reasoning of ignorance and brutality, Già deemed that to break the spirit and dull the brain was the surest method of enforcing obedience, and that the law of fear was surer and quicker in its results than that of kindness.

The child Quità, who was intelligent and thoughtful beyond her years, was apt enough at learning the steps and postures he taught her. She danced with a wondrous grace, a subtlety and intensity of delight that made each motion an instinct of poetry more than mere mechanical effort ; she would poise herself with the grace of a bird on a bough, of a leaf in the wind ; she would sway to and fro with the graceful sensuous motion, the dreamy poetic indolence that seems inborn in the dancing-girls of the East, and that some freak of nature had bestowed on her. At such times as these her taskmaster would watch her from under his bent shaggy brows with a look of ferocious satisfaction, and mutter through his white gleaming teeth of a future in store for her when her grace and her beauty should win back showers of gold to repay him for his labours now.

And at such times the woman would tremble and turn away sick and sad at heart, for well she knew the future mapped out for the little tender child, whose beauty was her only dower, but whose sex would prove that beauty's curse in the years to come !

"You will not harm her, Già," she said imploringly once, when through long hours of practising the child had shown no weariness, but danced on and on with a magical, exquisite grace, that was faultless even in her master's ruthless sight. "She is so fair, and sweet, and patient."

He laughed.

"Harm her? No; a woman child, with a face and form like that, will never meet with harm, save she herself chooses it. She may rule the world if she will!"

And Lisa shuddered, and turned more pale than even her wont. Was she not a woman, and did she not know how the world repays such rule as he spoke of?

"Holy Mother!" she murmured low and faint, as she left her husband's presence, "thou wert a woman once thyself; let that plea wing my prayers to thee now, for thee safety of the child I love!"

But if that Virgin Mother heard the prayer, she gave no heed or sign then.

CHAPTER VIII

"THE SPINNING OF THE WEB"

"AND you could learn nothing?" said Mdlle. Thé, looking up at the handsome face of the young Englishman.

Cecil Calverley had but just returned to Paris, and taken the opportunity of calling on the beautiful actress, in order to acquaint her with the non-success of their mission.

"Nothing," he answered. From the hour that Gaspard Ducroix took the children from their foster-mother's care, their whole existence seems shrouded in mystery. My friend, Lord Danvers, is grievously disappointed."

"Is he in Paris also?"

"Yes. He was unable to call to-day; but I undertook to give you all the necessary information."

"I am very glad to see you again," she said softly. "No excuse was necessary for your visit. You will always bring your own welcome, just as I shall always be your debtor."

"I wish your memory were not so faithful," said Cecil. "Who would not have gladly done for you the little that I did?"

"Nay, monsieur; your feat of heroism deserves a better name. As for your question—well, *who* did, save yourself?"

"Pray forget it, mademoiselle," continued the young man, looking decidedly embarrassed.

"I told you before I could never do that," she answered,

with a glance more eloquent than her words. "But since you are too modest to listen to your own praises, monsieur, let us change the subject. Do you stay long in Paris?"

"No; I return to England almost immediately."

A shade of disappointment seemed to rest on the face of the beautiful actress.

"It is your home, I suppose?"

"Ostensibly, yes. But I am something of a wanderer. I don't think I take kindly to the frivolities of fashionable life, or to the society of my fellow-man."

"Indeed!" and there was a natural curiosity in the gaze that met his own. "That is a somewhat strange confession for one of your years and—position."

"The accident of temperament is to blame for the one; that of birth for the other."

"You are not a democrat, monsieur?"

"Not in a political sense, I suppose. But! I fear I have small patience with class prejudices."

"And yet to look at you, one would say you were 'aristocrat' *au bout des ongles*."

Cecil laughed.

"That applies more to my friend Danvers than myself. He is strictly encased in British prejudices and proprieties. I—well, a knapsack and a shooting jacket answer most of my requirements, and my feet are my trustiest friends. I should scarcely like to say how many miles they have traversed—how much service they have done."

"You look as if you would always make life enjoyable to yourself," said his companion, letting her eyes rest thoughtfully on the frank handsome face. "But I should say you would care for no existence in which the mind had not a share."

"Are you, then, a reader of character, mademoiselle?"

"No; but *that* is easily discerned. Intelligence is the one thing most difficult to hide."

"You flatter me."

"I have no wish to do so. Some men think it meritorious to affect ignorance or stupidity; others to display the meretricious attainments which pass current for knowledge or culture. It is ~~only~~ ^{only} those who have nothing to gain by concealment or to fear from display who are at once natural and easy to read."

"Your art makes you a student of human nature, I see," answered Cecil, regarding her with more attention than he had yet bestowed. "Your sex as a rule do not trouble to look below the surface. Perhaps, after all, they are right. Few of us repay a deeper knowledge of our real natures."

A warm flush stole over her face at his words. She found herself wondering whether any other meaning lay beneath them.

"You are right," she said. Few lives or friendships are quite free from self-deception. It is so often the ideal we create that we worship; it is no wonder we would scarcely thank the hand that lifted the mask. Women, even more than men, suffer from such impracticable devotion. You invest us with a thousand attributes, because we possess one that pleases you, and then visit your own disappointment on our inability to answer such expectations." *

"You are severe, mademoiselle. Yet your own case must surely be the exception to the rule you lay down."

"How do you know?" she asked quickly, almost angrily.

"Pardon me, if I say that such artistic fame as Mdlle. D'Egmont has won would make a greater sceptic than myself believe in its merit."

"Fame!" she said scoffingly. "*Such* fame! In my heart I despise it, and I know you do the same. I read that in your words the other day. A woman's fame, too! When did it ever mean anything to her save misconception by the many—jealousy from the few? I would rather have strength, liberty, manhood, than any woman's gift of beauty or burden of genius. The one gives you the freedom of the world—the other holds in the bondage to every light tongue or idle jester upon whose lips your name is a fit subject for sport."

"You speak bitterly. I should fancy the world's resentment and you were strangers as yet."

"That shows how little you know of me, monsieur—or have learnt."

Beneath the interrogation of her glance Cecil Calverley felt his face flush. He marvelled whether she was acting a part now, or showing herself in her real nature to him. It was a dangerous thought, even to one so indifferent to women, so little the bond-slave of passion as himself.

"You are right. I know but little of you," he said, and a slight embarrassment was in his voice and face. "That is my misfortune, of course. I am but a bird of passage. Of the doings of the world I hear but little and care less. I believe I am a born Bohemian, though unfortunately compelled often by circumstances to don dress clothes and bow to the presiding goddess of social martyrdom. I have offended all my family and most of my friends. I love liberty, and Fate has made me a vassal. To spite Fate, I endeavour to take the law of independence into my own hands. There is *my* history for you, mademoiselle."

"A history you need not be ashamed of," she said, a certain

sympathy in her voice and eyes that spoke of fellow-feeling. "Shall I return your confidence in kind? The world will tell you soon enough what it believes me. Let me tell you for myself what I was and am. To others I have never cared to speak of these things; but I am your debtor to my life's end, monsieur, and I should like you to think that the life you have rescued is not so unworthy as you might be led to suppose."

"Madame, I assure you——"

"Pardon," she interrupted. "You are young, and brave, and credulous. You would be any woman's champion, so long as you knew she was not utterly worthless. My days of illusion are long over. The sins and sorrows of life have saddened my youth, and left me with but one purpose in that life now. What that purpose is I will tell you, and when you know, it will seem to you better a thousand times that you had left me to perish in the flames that night than live on as I live now."

Her voice had sunk to a whisper. Cecil watched her—aroused—fascinated despite himself, yet repelled by the doubts of her truth and the knowledge of her character that had come to him from the lips of the Count de Besançon.

"Your friend perhaps has told you of my sister," she said presently, calming her voice by a perceptible effort. "But he could have told you nothing of her love for me—of mine for her. In all the world she was the only being I loved, and her life of martyrdom seems to embitter all my past and urge me on to revenge it in the future. If ever an angel wore mortal guise, and in it lived and walked this world, Valerie was that mortal. Yet her life was one long martyrdom—her death shame. The crown of honour she should have worn in all men's sight, only a circlet of thorns that pierced her brow and tortured her with agony. Who gave her this martyrdom to bear? A man! Who were her traducers, her betrayers, her most faithless friends, her worst enemies? Men! Who stole every joy from her life, and dishonoured her womanhood, and turned her heart to bitterness and despair? Men. And who, when sick with the struggle, and worn out with the warfare, she crept aside to solitude, and so despairing, died—who then, with foul calumny and ignoble jests, made mockery of her griefs and pelted even her death-bed with stones of falsehood and of shame? Men, still men!"

Her form shook with a sudden shudder; she rose from her seat, and Cecil's wondering eyes gazed at her almost in awe, so transfigured was she by the passion of her emotions—the memory of those wrongs she had enumerated.

"I watched her death even as I had watched her life," she went on presently, her voice trembling, her eyes dimmed by a mist of tears. "And in my soul a great bitterness and a great hatred grew like twin-seeds, sown by a careless hand. Beside her death-bed I took an oath to avenge her, not on *one* man, but on all the race of men who should come in my way—for whom I should hold any allurements—over whom I should hold any sway. Four years ago, and I was young, fair, innocent, trusting! Now—my God! Now I see in all men my enemies—in all women my traducers; in life but one purpose; in death—an endless despair. That is my history. Make of it what you will, and when you hear my name, as you assuredly will hear it, think of all I have borne, all that has gone to make me what the world believes—Faustine!"

Cecil had risen too. His brow was flushed with mingled feelings; his heart throbbing almost with pain. Young, chivalrous, brave, ardent as he was, this woman's words fell like fire on his heart, and thrilled him with their passion and their scorn.

"I will not deny what I have heard of you," he said impetuously. "But even then I gave it little credence; now I give it none."

A strange smile stole over her face, mingling softness with irony, bitterness with regret.

"*You* believe in me?" she said gently, and her eyes rested on him, and their gaze filled him with a strange unrest. "Ah, monsieur, you are my preserver. I owe you my life. Why will you make me still further your debtor? Think of me as others think; believe of me what others believe. Let your doubts outlive my refutation, and your chivalry be like the world's. So best will you content yourself and serve me."

For a moment Cecil Calverley was silent. The strangeness of this interview—the suddenness of this confidence—the beauty and sorcery of this woman, had affected him despite himself. A strange scene truly for a morning call!

"I cannot obey you," he said gravely. "For after your words I can have no further belief in the world's scandals. You may have been sinned against—your purpose may be ignoble. With that I have nothing to do; but believe me, there will always be one to have faith in you, and to discredit what evil is said of you; and that one is myself."

"Thank you," she said simply. "I do not know what has prompted me to speak to you as I have done. The impulse of a moment, or the trust you have inspired. We do not meet on common ground, you know. Between us there will always be the memory of benefit conferred and received."

We may never meet again—or we may. I cannot tell. Our paths in life lie wide apart. There are errors that have had root in virtues, and virtues that have been reared in vice. You cannot judge me as I am ; and if you are wise you will go your way, and forget my name and myself. I, for my part, shall have no memory of you that is not grateful, though to me all men are enemies—now.”

Was it in human nature to hear such words—words uttered by a beautiful woman, and not feel piqued and—a little hurt? Indifferent as Cecil Calverley was to women’s beauty and women’s charms, yet when those dark mocking eyes swept over him like a challenge, a kindred defiance awoke in his own.

“Answer me one question,” he said impulsively. “Has no man been aught to you but an enemy—yet?”

“As I live, no!” she said with kindred impetuosity.

He drew a step nearer. His face flushed ; his heart beat with a tumultuous energy that sent the blood rushing through his veins.

“One word more,” he said, and the bold bright eyes looked straight into hers, while a new strange power of command thrilled his voice. “Will no man ever be aught but an enemy to you in the future? Are you sure of that?”

Involuntarily her eyes fell. Over all her beauty came a sudden warmth and softness, subtle and dangerous, and indescribable, as flame or fire.

“Can anyone be sure of the future?” she said evasively.

“No,” he answered softly, “for Fate lies in ambush at every step.”

“And Fate is but another name for—love!” she sighed ; and their eyes met, and with no need of words Cecil Calverley knew that he at least was in her sight no enemy.

CHAPTER IX

ENTANGLEMENT

THE first step towards the subjugation of a man is to arouse his interest.

That is a thing not always easy to do, for men get into a way of thinking one woman very much the same as another ; and, unless suddenly aroused or startled into closer observation, will seldom trouble their heads about them once they are out of their presence. It is not so often a beautiful woman who will dwell in a man’s memory as a woman who, by some piquant charm or characteristic trick of manner, wins his

attention in the first instance, and is clever enough to keep it awake and trace on it a picture of herself in the next.

He begins to think of her, speculate about her, dwell on her. Beauty alone is merely an attraction; there is something more required to fascinate and subdue, and provoke and arouse, and so draw the subtle network of interest around one special face or form, until the woman who owns it stands out in clear and distinct relief from among a crowd of others, more beautiful perhaps, equally charming, or gifted, yet who fall into the background before her memory, and only act as shadows to the sunlight of her actual presence.

Once let a man's thoughts busy themselves about a woman, and they will scarcely stop there. If she be able to interest him once, so surely will he desire to know more of her, and, if she be worth knowing, it will be strange indeed if such knowledge ends not in something warmer than the feeling she at first inspired.

Flattered vanity may be the groundwork of love more often than is supposed. To know that we are pleasing to another is no unsatisfactory thought to ourselves; it may seem an ignoble one, on which to base a pure and impersonal passion; but it very often is the foundation-stone of its structure nevertheless. That strange unconscious magnetism, which draws two lives together, has perhaps for its origin a thread of attraction as little visible to either as the first frail gossamer of a spider's web, but as little by little that thread is converted into a network that means bondage or death, so subtly and surely and imperceptibly does love weave its spells and close us in a myriad meshes, of whose formation we have been unconscious.

No power can unweave that web; it can only be—broken.

When Cecil Calverley had gone into Faustine's presence that morning it was with no other thought of her than he had hitherto held of all women whom he had known. When he left her he was astonished—puzzled—interested. •

Beauty in every shape and form and hue was to him a familiar thing. It is the essence of an artist's being, and Cecil had the artistic faculty to his heart's core. The personal loveliness of the woman whose life he had saved had in no way allured or disturbed him. But her words had.

He saw she was unhappy, bitter, misjudged; and the knowledge first startled and then appealed to that innate chivalry which lives in the minds of all men who have honour and compassion for what is weak, and frail, and feminine. Faustine as an actress repelled him; as a woman, young, suffering, outraged, she aroused his pity. She forced him to think of her whether he would or no.

There had been no intention on her part to do this. He stood in her sight as no other man had yet stood. She was his debtor, and the thought was strangely sweet to her, but none the less was he of the sex she counted as enemies, distrusted as friends, despised as lovers. As he passed from her sight, she, to whom every faintest sign of passion's birth was known, knew also that he would as surely seek her again; that in his young, brave, fearless heart she had sown the first seeds of tumult and discontent, and for once she felt reluctant to pursue the work or reap the harvest of madness that might follow.

Love was wearisome to her as an oft-repeated tale. Such love as she had inspired a hundred times was too easy, too familiar to be of any value. But for once her thoughts followed a man who had left her presence, and her face grew shadowed with discontent as if those thoughts were neither pleasant nor desirable.

"I had better never see him again," she murmured restlessly. "It would be the greatest kindness I can show him. He does not even know his own danger yet. For myself——"

She paused. The mirror at which she involuntarily glanced showed her her own face in all its sorcery of beauty, and a strange smile stole over her lips. It faded away, and was followed by a sigh. She rose impatiently, and went to the piano and took out some songs, and then sat down to sing. But she finished the thought in her own mind.

"After all, why should I not, if it pleases me? I have never known happiness—yet."

Had Lord Danvers been less preoccupied in mind, he would have noticed a difference in Cecil Calverley's manner when he spoke of that morning's interview. As it was, he listened with but slight attention, and asked no questions respecting the beautiful actress, with whose history he was so strangely connected.

The thought of being unable to accomplish Valerie's last wishes was always uppermost in his mind. It angered him when he reflected on his own impotence, and remembered her unfulfilled desires.

But he was powerless to alter the one or execute the other.

"I am sick of Paris," he said to Cecil that night, as they strolled homewards through the brilliantly-lighted streets. "I shall return to England. Let us leave to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" echoed Cecil doubtfully. "That is very sudden. There is that picture I want to copy in the Louvre you know. Why are you in such a hurry to leave Paris?"

"I am a restless mortal always," he said with a short laugh, "and Paris has so many memories for me. Well, I will go to Brussels, and come back for you in a week's time; how will that suit?"

"Admirably," said Cecil, conscious and yet ashamed of a certain relief the words brought him. "My picture will be quite finished by that time."

"Why you wish to copy I don't know," resumed Lord Danvers presently. "I thought you only cared to create."

"So I do, chiefly, but that picture is so marvellous. I feel I must have it. And then Paris has no memories for—me!"

"Not yet," said Lord Danvers quietly. "But take care of yourself. It is always easy to mock at danger when danger is far away."

Cecil laughed—the frank, heartwhole, happy laughter that is so good to hear, that we seldom do hear after the first freshness of youth is over.

"Danger!" he said; "I have no fear. Art is my only mistress, and I mean to be true to her, exacting as she is."

"You sit upon a hollow throne for all that," murmured his friend sententiously. "Trust me, your heart will rebel even if your mind be content. The artist is but mortal after all."

"How you do harp upon that one string," said Cecil impatiently. "I care for women as little as you—yourself, French women in particular."

Yet even as he said the words a certain warmth crept over his face, a little uneasiness stole into his heart. He remembered two eyes, soft, luminous, unspeakably sad, that had looked into his own not many hours before, and in his memory still lingered the words he had heard that day, from a woman's lips: "You cannot judge me as I am, and if you are wise you will go your way and forget me."

Why could he not be wise? Why was he so averse to leave Paris then and there, and go with Lord Danvers to England?

Ah, why?

There are some questions we dare not ask ourselves, because we dread the answer we should feel compelled to give.

The next day, true to his word, Lord Danvers left Paris. The next day, also, Cecil Calverley betook himself to his work of copying the picture that had so enchanted him, but for once his thoughts were preoccupied, his fingers listless, his mind astray from his occupation, and so slowly did the painting progress, that at last, vexed and impatient with himself, he put it aside and went out into the gay streets, and so on, half mechanically, till he found himself in the Bois. Crowds of people were all about; the birds were singing

among the budding leaves ; the wind blew fresh and sweet from the west, with all the promise of spring in its fragrant breath ; the sunshine sparkled clear and brilliant everywhere. He felt refreshed and invigorated. The impatience and unrest left him, and turning away from the throng he sauntered slowly down one of the *allées des piétons*. There he came face to face with a woman dressed in some soft dusky fabric, out of which her beauty shone brilliant and alluring as the day. A servant walked behind her. By her side was a great dog, carrying in his mouth a basket of violets.

Impulsively Cecil stopped. It was Faustine. She only bowed and passed on, leaving him flushed, irresolute, disturbed. He would have liked to have spoken to her, but he dared not follow, since she had so evidently discouraged his intention. He had no choice but to pursue his way through the yet leafless avenues ; but it seemed to him suddenly as if the spring day lacked something of the brilliance and exhilarance it had possessed a short time before.

Turn where he would, a woman's face seemed to haunt him, and two soft luminous eyes looked back at him wherever he gazed.

In a fever of impatience he went back to his hotel and took out a square of canvas, and so set himself to work to produce that face from memory. He painted on till dusk. Then, as he put his brush away with a sigh of regret, a little perfumed note was brought to him.

It contained an invitation from Faustine that he would make one of her supper-party that evening. Two days before Cecil Calverley would have rejected such an invitation with a laugh and a little contempt. Now—now he accepted it without an instant's hesitation.

CHAPTER X

DOWN TO THE DEEPS

Let me go over your good gifts
That crown you queen.

It was with mingled feelings that Cecil found himself in the supper-room of the beautiful actress.

Even his artistic eyes could find no fault with the room or its appointments. No meretricious gilding, nor gaudy hues, nor ostentatious display of luxury was here. Only soft, deep-toned hues, and shaded lights, and masses of ferns and flowers in every nook, and alternating with the silver and crystal of the table.

The company assembled were but six in all—a young French poet ; a singer, with a sweet pale face and a divine voice, whose fame was well known to the young Englishman ; an elderly lady, with the well-preserved grace and faultless charm of a thoroughly-refined Frenchwoman, and whom Mdlle. D'Egmont introduced laughingly as her duenna ; an actor of the Comédie Française, well renowned for his wit and good looks ; and Cecil himself, completed the number of guests.

It was a new element of society to Cecil Calverley, and he enjoyed it. There was nothing in the tone of conversation to have offended the most fastidious taste, and the hostess herself was so brilliant and charming that Cecil found himself watching and wondering about her more and more. The vague element of distrust that had been aroused in his mind by the Count de Besançon had utterly died away now. Looking at the beautiful proud face, listening to the somewhat disdainful indifference or contemptuous sarcasms with which she answered any words of compliment, he found himself more puzzled and disturbed than he could have believed possible.

He spoke but little himself ; yet a vainer man than he could not but have seen that their hostess always listened when he spoke, and that when her eyes met his, their languor or indifference changed to a certain softness and melancholy that was infinitely alluring.

Various subjects of conversation arose, and were discussed. Art, of course, and all matters appertaining to it—the stage, too, and its many-sided life, were touched upon ; but Mdlle. D'Egmont seemed less inclined to pursue that subject than any other—another anomaly at which Cecil wondered.

When supper was over, her servants brought cigars and liqueurs, and set them before the guests ; and the actress rose from the table and threw herself down on one of the many inviting-looking lounges scattered about the room. Her two friends followed her example.

“Don't you smoke ?” she asked Cecil in surprise, as she saw him decline a cigar.

“I do, but not in the presence of ladies,” he answered. “Pipes and cigars, like everything else material, have their own charms in their own place.”

“I do not object to it,” she said, regarding him with some surprise ; “I hope it is not out of consideration for me that you are so self-denying.”

“Don't give me credit for a motive so virtuous,” laughed the young man. “I am simply not a slave to the habit, though I occasionally indulge in it.”

He rose as he spoke and came over to where she was seated, and drew a low chair close to her own.

"I would prefer to talk to you—if I may," he said in a low voice.

"Would you object to my smoking while you do so, then?" she asked coolly, as she drew a small stand beside her, and took from it a daintily-embroidered cigarette-case.

Cecil drew back involuntarily. He detested the habit in a woman, and the smile on his lips was somewhat forced as he answered :

"Of course not."

"I can see you do not approve, though," she said, with a mocking smile ; "but everyone does it now. By the way, where is your friend—Lord Danvers?"

"He has gone to Brussels."

"He is very rich, is he not?" she pursued.

"He is considered so," said Cecil briefly ; "and he is an only son."

"You seem great friends," said Mdlle. D'Egmont, with a rapid glance at her companion's face ; "but he is much older than yourself, is he not?"

"A few years—yes."

"I believe in men's friendships," she continued, poising the cigarette in her fingers. "I think they do hold good amidst the storms and calms of life. Ours seldom do. I wonder why. But I do not speak from experience. I have never made a woman a friend in the real sense of the word. Somehow I don't get on with them."

It was a grand opening for a compliment had Cecil Calverley felt disposed to pay one, but the conventional phrases of modern society were not familiar to him, and he passed the opportunity by.

"I think there is more reality about men's friendships," he said ; "there seems to be an innate rivalry among women. They find it hard to forgive each other for being better looking or better dressed, or winning more admiration. Now these questions never enter a man's mind. He likes his friends for their own sakes. The fact of their being popular, rich, admired, would make no real difference to his feelings."

"Unless a woman sowed discord."

"That, of course. Unfortunately, it has often happened."

"But not with you?"

She spoke quickly, impulsively. The surprise in his glance as he looked at her warned her of her error.

"I beg your pardon. I have of course no right to ask such a question."

"Do not apologise—there is no need," he answered quietly. "No, not with me,"

"Do you follow him to Brussels?" she asked, after a short pause.

"No. He returns here in a week's time, and then we go to England together. It is twelve months since I was home."

"You will be glad to see it again, then," she said, tossing the half-finished cigarette aside, while a shadow seemed to fall over her face. "Home—how empty a sound that is for some ears, how sweet and full a one for others! For me, I have never known a home."

"It is a sad confession for a woman's lips," said Cecil gently; "but it is too often the penalty they pay for fame or greatness."

A sigh escaped her lips.

"Ah!" she murmured, "if it were only *that*!"

A momentary silence fell between them. An eager buzz of conversation was going on amongst the other guests. Cecil and his companion seemed quite unnoticed. The young man looked at her as she leant back on her chair—that shadow of melancholy on her face, of weariness in her eyes. They only heightened the charm of her beauty and appealed to him more powerfully than her brilliance or coquetry could ever have done. He bent lower over her, and his voice grew softer as he spoke.

"You bade me believe what the world said of you, once," he murmured hurriedly; "I could not. You told me we might never meet again, yet we have done so. I came here to-night because I felt I *must* see you. I lingered on in Paris for that same reason. Tell me, why did you contradict your own words? Why did you bid me to your presence again when you must know the danger that lives there? Your power is an old-told tale to you, doubtless. A week ago I could have smiled at it; now—I know how fatal that power may be!"

He had not meant to say such words, but they had rushed to his lips impulsively. He so longed to know if indeed the world had wronged her as he believed, and the sorcery of her beauty swept over him like a fire, before whose breath prudence and self-control and prejudice were shrivelled up and effaced.

Her face flushed. She looked quickly up at him.

"I will not affect to misunderstand you," she answered, her voice so low that he could scarcely hear it. "I did say we had better never meet again, and then contradicted my own words on the impulse of a moment. I met you this morning. I knew you were in Paris alone, and so I asked you to come. I can never look upon you as a stranger, for I cannot forget I owe you my life, and it would be untruthful did I say I cared to see you no more."

The subtle flattery of the words stole into his heart and made it beat more wildly than it had ever done for any woman's words yet.

"You are kind and cruel too," he said involuntarily.

She laughed with a little contempt.

"I have small faith in men's words. I told you once before how I regarded them. But I cannot call you an enemy, nor would I ask you to call me a friend. Yet, after all I should have allowed my first resolve to stand. But I am little accustomed to consider my motives. I act but too often on impulse. You are sorry, then, you came?"

"Can you ask that? I only fear that your gratitude will be more cruel than your forgetfulness, since you have taught me also to remember."

"A man's memory is rarely faithful," she said coldly. "In a week's time you will have left Paris. Another week will supply you with oblivion."

"How can you tell that? If you judge me by others you should remember that every rule has its exception."

"Yours is not an easy character to read," she answered lightly; "but I could see soon enough that you were indifferent to women. Had it been otherwise—well, I might have thought twice before asking you here."

"A man may be indifferent for long, simply because no woman he has met has had the power to change the feeling into anything warmer."

"True," she said musingly: "but such a man has always an ideal in his own mind, and the woman he loves must in some way resemble it. Have you not had something of that sort in yours?"

"I believe I have; but it was a something so vague and shadowy that it could hardly be materialised, I fancy."

"You artists are more independent of reality than any other class of beings. Everything is too beautiful in your dreams for the coarser rivalry of flesh and blood. I think you are to be envied. Genius is independent of sympathy; it contents itself."

"Not always. It is too often a gift that breaks the heart of its possessor. Do not all the records of great lives breathe out something of the sorrow and suffering within? If they do not stoop to conciliate, or pause to explain, they find but scant comprehension and still less belief."

"You speak bitterly for one so young," said Mdlle. D'Egmont thoughtfully. "You at least seem supremely indifferent to the world's opinions."

"I trouble very little about them. But I scarcely consider myself an artist; dearly as I love brush and pencil, I

am selfish enough to work for my own pleasure—certainly not for fame.”

“And yet you have won it. You see I have discovered your secret.”

“You are clever enough to discover most things, madame,” answered the young man gravely.

“And be equally dissatisfied with the result,” she said indifferently. “It is a sad experience when one stands and looks at life, and sees nothing that can give a throb of pleasure, a brief forgetfulness, a semblance of what poets call happiness.”

“A sad experience, as you say ; but surely not your own?”

“Whose else should it be ? And it is not so wonderful or so exceptional a case, I dare believe.”

“Perhaps not, but it is difficult to believe it applies to yourself.”

“I don’t see why. Few of us wear our real faces for the world nowadays. And as there are few lives without reproach, so there are still fewer that bear no burden of pain or shadow of suffering. But now, monsieur, my guests are rising. Our conversation has lasted long enough. Do you care for cards ? We generally play here.”

The old reckless defiance was in her voice once more. It fell on Cecil like a shock that sobered and startled him at one and the same moment. Talking to her he had forgotten——

What ? He scarcely knew.

Vague doubts arose again. The disquietude he had banished for a time returned and filled him with a certain restlessness and pain his life had never known before.

“If you will excuse me, I will take my leave now,” he said in answer to her question. “I am no card-player.”

“And no smoker ! Ah, monsieur, the world will allow you no virtues if you have not some vices ; surely you know that ?”

Cecil laughed.

“I have vices enough,” he said. “Do not fear it will be my fate to be canonised. I know most games of skill and chance, but it is my misfortune that, once known, they have lost their interest.”

“If that be the case, I will not seek to detain you,” she answered, holding out her hand. “Adieu.”

“Will you not rather say, *au revoir* ? May I not come again ?”

“If you wish, certainly,” she said, looking at him with evident surprise. “But, believe me, it is best you do not.”

“May I judge of that ? I know your meaning. I feel

you are right ; but obedience is less easy now than it would have been—a week ago."

"Hush !" she said softly. "No empty courtesies between us. If you care to come, come. I shall always be glad to see you."

She withdrew her hand, and Cecil calmly made his adieux to her other guests. Then he went homewards through the streets, his pulses throbbing, his brain dizzy as with wine.

The passion he had scorned had laid its first spell upon him.

CHAPTER XI

If one should love you with real love
(Such things have been).

AFTER her guests had left, Faustine threw herself down on the cushions of her couch, all the vivacity and abandon of her manner gone now, a strange weariness and sadness on her face.

"What made me do it ?" she asked herself restlessly. "Why did I bid him come ? He is so different to all other men—young, brave, loyal, chivalrous. And he will believe, perhaps. It would be so easy to make him do *that*. And the greater his faith, the greater his sufferings. Shall I spare him in time ?"

A servant entered with letters and disturbed her thoughts. Mechanically she glanced at the different handwritings, but at one she started and seemed visibly disturbed. Hastily tearing open the envelope she read a few lines, then the colour faded from her face, leaving her pale as death. "How strange !" she murmured. "Just now, too. Surely he could not have known ?—and yet the burning of the theatre was in all the papers. The name might have been published."

Again she read the letter, and again the same discomposure was evident in her face and manner. "Is it fate !" she muttered. "A moment ago, and I had resolved to see him no more ; but Père Jerome's words are a command. How could he have known already ?"

Thoughtfully and sadly she folded the letter up, and then locked it away in her *escritoire*. "I cannot send him away now, it is out of my power," she sighed, and so went slowly away to her sleeping-room, disturbed, yet not ill-pleased that the decision had been taken out of her own hands.

Meanwhile Cecil was bewildered, ill at ease, yet vaguely conscious of a new and subtle change within himself—a something he feared to analyse, yet could not wholly dis-

regard. His heart was moved to a certain softness and pain that his life had never known.

"I am surely not mad enough to care for a woman, after all," he thought impatiently; "and such a woman! What is her beauty but a snare? How can my ideal of the purity and innocence of womanhood find an answering representative in one whose name is on all men's lips, whose nature is so mingled and contradictory, whose words never refute the evil spoken of her? Ah, Heaven! if the spirit within her were but as fair as the form, who could resist her? Is it my misfortune that I cannot be content with mere personal loveliness? Other men would ask no more, and she has sought—me."

The night brought him no sleep or rest for once. He saw nothing but that one face, now brilliant with all the sorcery of loveliness, now shadowed and subdued to yet more dangerous charm by feelings that seemed earnest, and regrets that bore the stamp of reality. She had herself told him that all men were her enemies and her victims. Did she but seek to place him on that fatal list? Was even her gratitude a snare?

"Can I forget her if I never see her more?" he asked himself through those long sleepless hours, when he tossed feverishly to and fro, haunted but by one memory—pursued but by one thought.

He could not answer that question; but the pain it brought might have done so, had he known more of human passions and dwelt less on ideal perfection. His life, for once, seemed to have passed beyond his own control, and a vague dissatisfaction took the place of its former peace. There was bitterness and sweetness both, in these memories. At least, she had remembered him, she had cared to see him, and he alone, of all her guests, had she favoured with marked personal attention. Then, too, she was not happy. Whatever shadows of sin and suffering lay about her they might not have been of her own bringing; her words had breathed as much, and all that was best and most chivalrous in Cecil Calverley's nature responded to the pity she had evoked.

So he thought and so he wondered all through the long dark hours—a thousand vague fancies, and painful doubts, and wild hopes surging through his brain. The softness of a woman's smile—the sorcery of a woman's memory—these things meant nothing to him as yet. He could not have believed even now that they were sufficient foundation for the structure of an intense and heartfelt passion. Yet they were.

With the daylight he fell asleep, worn out and spent by such novel emotion. When he woke, his eyes fell on a letter

placed by his side. He tore it hastily open, and read an urgent entreaty from the Superior of the Home where he had placed his little foundling. "The child is very ill," ran the message; "she cries incessantly for you. If it be in your power to come, pray do so at once."

Cecil sprang up and dressed with all haste. "I must go—of course," he said to himself.

Then the memory of the previous night flashed across him. Leaving Paris would be to leave Faustine. He paused and leant against his dressing-table, and his face grew very troubled. He felt strangely reluctant to quit Paris just now, and yet—might it not be best? "If it be but a fancy, I shall soon forget it," he said to himself with sudden resolution. "Absence will surely cure me."

That day, when, in obedience to her received instructions, Faustine despatched a message to Cecil Calverley at his hotel, her messenger returned with the answer that the English gentleman had departed suddenly from Paris that morning, leaving no address and no information as to when he would return.

A cloud crossed the brow of the beautiful actress as she heard. Men, as a rule, were not eager—or, indeed, able—to escape from her fascinations, once she had chosen to exert them. After his words, too, the previous evening!

"He is wise," she thought, with a strange smile, "wiser than I feared he would prove, but I do not like the feeling of being baffled. If fate throws him across my path again—well, I think he will not escape so easily a second time."

It was as well Cecil Calverley did not see her then with that mocking smile on her lips, that evil glitter in her eyes. His vague fears might have assumed shape and form. At least the dawn of passion might have had no day. But he was far away now, and her memory only pursued him the more persistently because he had been forced to leave her by circumstances, just as he had been led to her by fate.

The good mother Thérèse, Superior of the Convent or Retreat of Notre Dame de Bon Secours, was sitting alone in her little chamber. The spring sunlight fell on her placid face, the dusky folds of her dress, and the long rosary at her waist. It lit up the pictured saints on the wall, the missal on her lap, the bunches of primroses and violets grouped together in a quaint old bowl before her. The surroundings were so peaceful and so fair that they seemed to speak in the very eloquence of silence of the safe calm life led within those walls; yet on the aged face was a strangely troubled look, and on the brow a cloud of heavy care. Suddenly she rang a bell beside her, and rose from her seat, and stood upright

and rigid, with the beads of her rosary clasped tight in her fingers, and her eyes fixed with pained intensity on the door of her room.

It opened softly, and one of the sisters appeared in answer to her summons.

"What news?" the Superior asked anxiously.

"None better, holy mother. The child has passed a bad night, and seems weaker than ever this morning."

"Who is with her now?"

"Sister Veronica."

"Good; I will be there directly. Stay, is that the convent-bell?"

"Yes, *ma mère*. It has just rung."

"Who can it be?—at this hour, too?"

"Père Jerome, perhaps," hazarded the sister respectfully. "It is about the time for one of his visits."

"Go and see, and bring me word here; and remember, it is my wish that special prayers be said in the chapel, and by the sisters individually, for the recovery of the child."

The sister bowed silently and left the room, while the aged mother reseated herself to wait for tidings of the visitor.

Suddenly, in the convent aisle without came the sound of a firm loud tread. She started and listened eagerly.

"Not Père Jerome's velvet footfall," she said to herself. "Who can it be?"

Her doubts were soon at rest, for the door unclosed and revealed the stalwart figure and handsome face of Cecil Calverley.

"Ah, my son, welcome!" cried the good mother, rising and stretching out her hands in fervent greeting. "So you have received my letter?"

"Yes, madame, as you see," answered the clear ringing tones of the young Englishman. "How is the child?"

"My son," said the aged woman sadly, "you find us in deep sorrow; the child (may the saints bless her!) is very ill. For the last few months she has pined and fretted herself about something or someone; we cannot tell who or what it is. No one can console her. The constant mourning has been too much for the little heart to bear. Her health has given way, and she is very, very ill."

Tears dimmed the kind tender eyes as she spoke, and Cecil looked at the troubled, grieved old face with a sympathy that touched her deeply.

"I have grown to love her so dearly," she continued. "She is so sweet, so patient, so gentle. Never was child like her, I am sure! And so lovely, too! Her smile is like an angel's!"

"Can you find nothing out about her? She is old enough to have some memory of things or persons."

"She talks much about her mother, but we cannot find out her name, or where she lived. We can make nothing out of her words; she is so very young; only a babe, monsieur. And yet what a feeling heart in the tiny body!"

"What have you called her?" asked Cecil, as the good woman wiped her eyes and paused a moment for breath.

"We asked her her name, and she always said it was Elise; but as we have two sisters of that name here we call her *Félice*."

"May I see her now, madame?"

"Most assuredly, my son. She has never forgotten you; she speaks of you incessantly."

"Indeed; that shows a greater power of recollection than I should have thought possible in one so young. She saw me for such a short time, too!"

"Quite long enough, it appears, my son. And, indeed, I look upon it as my duty to foster such remembrance in her mind. Did you not save her life?"

"In common humanity, madame, I could not have done anything else. Pray, do not burden that life with a debt of gratitude owed to me!"

The venerable, simple-minded woman looked up at the young man's face with surprise.

"You have a noble heart, my son," she said, while her eyes wandered over the handsome figure before her with a wistful tenderness of regard.

He moved impatiently.

"We waste time in idle words, madame. Can you not bring me to the child now?"

The aged mother rose immediately, and, signing to him to follow her, she led the way to a pleasant little chamber with nothing conventual about it, save its extreme simplicity, and its panels carved with the heads of the saints, and hung with pictures of martyrs and angels.

The soft bright hues of spring flowers gleamed here and there from vase and cup; the little bed was pure and white as driven snow, and nestled amidst the pillows was the cherubic loveliness of the child he had rescued in the autumn woods a few months before.

She was white as the linen around her. Her closed eyes, with the long sweeping lashes resting on her cheeks, gave her an almost deathlike look. The little wasted hand which Cecil touched was dry and hot as fire, and the tiny rosy mouth was parched and cracked as if with inward fever.

She looked so lovely, and yet so fragile in that trancelike

rest that Cecil held his breath as he gazed, scarce able to believe it was anything mortal on which his eyes rested, or which his hand touched.

Suddenly her eyes opened. She looked up at the face bending so tenderly over her, and into her own came a rush of colour and a light of joy.

A cry, soft and glad as the coo of a nestling bird, escaped her lips. The little thin baby arms were flung eagerly round his neck as he bent his tall form towards her. A rush of tender, murmuring, incoherent words left her lips. Then she rested her head on his breast and nestled in his strong young arms, and so lay and fell asleep—content.

“Her first calm sleep for six long days and nights. Now our Blessed Lady be praised!” murmured the Superior, in awed, hushed tones. “Could it be for you she fretted, my son?”

And Cecil, looking down at the face pillowed on his breast with the tumbled golden curls framing its beauty, and on the baby brow the rest and peace of contented slumber, felt a strange thrill of tenderness at his heart, and smiled, and was silent.

CHAPTER XII

THE LITTLE FOUNDLING

The first of any
Seem the happiest years that come.

CECIL stayed with his little foundling all through that lovely springtime.

Slowly and gradually her health improved, but her one incessant demand was for him, and he had not the heart to leave her.

He had a room in the neighbourhood of the convent, and devoted himself to painting an altar-piece as a gift for the good old Superior. As soon as ever the little one could leave her bed she was taken to her protector's quarters, and there she would lie on a couch by the window for the greater part of the day, looking with wondering eyes at his manipulation of brush and pencil, unconscious that she herself was acting as his model, and that the sweet loveliness of her own face shone out from the canvas as that of the infant Christ.

Her dreamy, unchildish gravity, her sweetness of temper and docility of disposition; her quaint, old-fashioned fancies and passionate affection for himself—all touched the young

man's heart with a strange pity and tenderness. She was never happy when away from him. His name lived in her childish prayers and occupied all her thoughts; and meanwhile she passed from convalescence to health, and the weeks glided by in a dreamy monotony that almost effaced all memory of time, while Cecil painted on in his little quiet chamber with glimpses of the fair spring verdure from its open windows, and the cadence of the *Angelus* or the far-off chant of hymns, and the swell of the organ music alone breaking the hush of perfect stillness around those quiet woods.

"I wonder what I shall do with you, little one?" said Cecil musingly, one day, as he laid aside his painting brush, and met the wistful, loving gaze of the child's soft eyes fixed on his face.

"Let me stay with you," she said quickly, in a tone of one whose decision is incontrovertible.

The young man smiled.

"An easy way of solving the difficulty. But suppose I cannot?"

Her face grew troubled and sad.

"I will be so good," she said in her pretty baby *patois*.

"I have no doubt of it, dear; but still I cannot take you with me when I go. I want to tell you you must stop here with the kind sisters, and be very good and obedient to them, and learn all they teach you; and then, some day, when you are older and cleverer, and can say what you would like to do, I will take you from here and place you with kind friends."

"Why will you not take me now?" she half sobbed, her pretty lips quivering, her eyes tearful under the shade of their heavy lashes.

"You cannot understand, dear, if I explain. I wish I could find out to whom you belonged. Is there no one, nothing you remember? Who left you in the wood where I found you?"

She shook her head in perplexity.

"I know 'Ita," she said. "Shall I see 'Ita if I'm good?"

"But who is 'Ita?"

"I love 'Ita. I was asleep, and then he took her away," the child lisped in her broken French.

"Who took her away?"

She shook her little head again and remained silent.

"Always the same," murmured Cecil impatiently. "We never get beyond that point."

"Perhaps you will find 'Ita," said the little one presently. "You found me."

"True enough. But if my destiny is to be that of discovering lost infants wherever I go, I shall have to found a foundling hospital on my own account," laughed Cecil with amusement.

The child looked gravely at him.

"I should like you to find 'Ita," she said solemnly. "If you go out in the world to look for her, I will stay here and pray for you."

"What is she like?" asked Cecil.

The little one looked at him in puzzled silence for a moment or two, then suddenly pointed to the picture from which the sad grave eyes of the Child-Christ looked out at them both.

"Like that," she said.

"But that is you!" Cecil told her in surprise. "I have painted your face there."

"No," was the reply, in tones of great decision, "that's 'Ita."

"Then 'Ita is a little child like yourself?" suggested Cecil. "A little girl you know—a sister, perhaps?"

The little face clouded once again.

"When I was asleep she went away," she said, repeating the words that Cecil had so often heard before, and which lay like a stumbling-block in the path of his investigations into the child's parentage or antecedents.

"Well, if I try and find 'Ita, will you remain here and not fret yourself ill any more?" asked Cecil at length.

She raised herself eagerly. "Oh yes. But you will come and see me? You won't go quite away and never come back?"

"Certainly not," Cecil assured her gravely. "I will come back as often as I can; and each time I come I shall expect to find you have learnt more and grown stronger, and are good and obedient to the kind old Mère Thérèse, who is so fond of you. You will be all this, my child, will you not?"

"If you tell me—yes."

And Cecil knew she meant it.

He had grown to feel a strange fondness for the little creature whose life he had saved; and, to his own thinking, and in obedience to those laws of conscience, duty, and integrity which he had framed, and to which he held so closely, he deemed it only his right to watch over the future of the helpless child thus thrown upon his care, and dependent on his bounty. The singleness and fidelity of her love for him touched him very deeply; for a child's love is indeed a pearl of great price—a thing so pure, and unalienable, and faithful, that its spontaneous affection can never appeal in vain to

any heart, unless, indeed, that heart be wholly vile or wholly callous.

To Cecil, in his hot, chivalrous, impulsive youth, with his artist's fancies and his poet's heart, this pure, unsought adoration of the child he had rescued appealed with tenfold power. He had saved her carelessly enough, it is true, and had thought then that, having provided for her a place of shelter and safety, he might acquit himself of further responsibility; but he found that this was not possible. Insensibly, her welfare had become to him a thing of importance; and his liberal, compassionate heart opened to her with the fondness that was only an instinct, and the fidelity that claimed no recompence in the present and dreaded no shadow in the future.

"My little waif," he said tenderly, as those last words of hers reached him, "you will do all that is right, I know, for my sake, and I will do all I can for yours. I wish, though, you could enjoy the bright brief dawn of your childhood as thoroughly as others of your age and sex do; but, unfortunately, this home is not even like a convent, where other girls of your age are admitted for education. You will have none but the sisters to associate with, and they are all old, grey-headed women. Still, you will be safe, and, I hope, happy."

"If you go, when will you come again?" she asked, not comprehending his words.

"With the autumn leaves," he answered brightly. "It will be a whole year, then since I found you."

She sighed, and glanced out of the open window.

"It is a long time," she said softly, while a strange sadness crept over her childish face, that gave it a gravity beyond its years. "But I will wait, and I will pray to God, as you told me, not to the saints."

"Ay, do," he said earnestly. "The God who made all the earth so beautiful, and would have made all life so fair, had man only let Him."

"Why would not man let Him?"

"Ah, my little one, that is just the question that vexes all philosophy and poisons every creed. Why? I suppose because sin is so much pleasanter than virtue, because the barter of unknown good for present enjoyment is so sweet and easy and irresistible, and the evil of the exchange is only learnt too late."

She looked wonderingly at him, not able to follow his words.

"You need not trouble about such things," he said softly, as he stroked the bright soft hair from her childish brow.

"Evil is far enough from your knowledge yet. I would it might always remain so; but then one cannot always be a child."

"Is it best?" she asked gravely.

"Best? Ay—that it is—only the last to believe it are the children."

"One can do so much when one is grown up," she murmured. "I shall be glad when I am like you."

He laughed.

"Foolish one, how little you know of what is before you! You have the sun and the air, and the sweet untroubled calm of irresponsibility, and the love of good women, and you ought to be happy. When you are like me, as you say, you will look back on these things and wonder you never valued them more. A child's life in the woods, on the water, with a song on the lips, not a care in the heart, with no fear of the future, and an intense joy in the present—ah, my dear, there is not a man or woman who has not lived to envy that."

"I am happy when you are here," she said softly, leaning her warm bright cheek on his hand. "Must you go?"

He smiled a little sadly.

"I must. Do you know that it is only for your sake I have remained here so long? But when you were so ill, little one, I had not the heart to leave you, and so stayed on and on. But I cannot do so any longer. I have my own duties in another home."

"Where do you live?" she asked.

"In England—not in your own land at all. I happened to be travelling here when I found you."

"Is it far? Will you take me there one day?"

Cecil looked doubtful. The claims of his foundling upon his future liberty for the first time pressed themselves on his notice.

"That I cannot promise," he answered her at length. "It is not always possible to do what one wills or wishes. And now; *petite*, run off; I hear Sister Marie's voice calling you, and she will scold me for sending you back with such a grave little face."

The child rose at once. Ready obedience was instinctive to her.

"Adieu!" she said, in her pretty childish way. "I will not forget what you have said to me; but don't be very long away."

"Are you afraid of forgetting me?"

"I could never do that," was the grave rejoinder; "not even if I do not see you again till I am a woman."

"A woman!" thought Cecil to himself, when she had left him, and he was busily replacing his paints and brushes. "A woman! Good Heavens, I never thought of that when I rescued her from her forest cradle! What am I to do with her a few years hence?"

The future alone could answer that question.

"Shall I see *her* in Paris?" he asked himself as he was whirled at express speed back to the bright capital once more. "I have not forgotten her; does she remember me, I wonder?"

He threw himself back in his seat and gave himself up to thoughts he had long ceased striving to resist. No; he had not forgotten Faustine. Her spells had been sure enough to chain his memory, and he longed to see her again, as never had he longed to see a human face before.

"I shall only stay for a day and then go on to England," he told himself, and marvelled a little at the glad thrill that ran through his veins as he pictured the welcome of the woman whose image he could not banish. Mental disquietude had been a thing unknown to him till these last few weeks, and therefore perhaps this fancy had taken all the stronger hold of his imagination, and grown into more vivid life with every thought that dwelt upon it.

It was no sacred pure-souled vision now. It was a feverish dream of a woman's loveliness—a restless longing for a woman's presence. Yet he would not have exchanged this fever and unrest for the sweetest hour of calm he had ever known.

Strange force of human passion that laughs at self-control! Strange madness that hugs its own chains and mocks at freedom; that holds its misery sweeter than all peace, and clings but closer to the thing that tortures it!

You'd give him—poison shall we say?
Or what, Faustine?

CECIL CALVERLEY remained only long enough at his hotel to remove the dust of travel and take some necessary refreshment. Then he hastened to the presence of the woman whose memory had haunted him through those past weeks. She was at home, and he was shown into the boudoir where she had first received him. As she rose to greet him, as the loveliness that now seemed but greater and more irresistible

met his eyes once more, he marvelled how he could ever have left her—ever borne those weeks of silence and separation. For a moment he could find no words—he could only look at her and feel that life was paradise. She read his emotion plainly enough ; she was quite calm herself.

She pointed to a seat beside her own. His sudden departure and complete silence had piqued and disturbed her more than she would have liked to acknowledge, but not for worlds would she have shown any curiosity respecting one or other.

"Welcome, monsieur," she said, with that smile that was like sunlight. "I had no idea you were in Paris."

"I have but just returned. I was called away some weeks ago on urgent business," answered Cecil. "I saw by the papers that you were acting again, madame."

"Yes ; the damage to the theatre was soon repaired, and I resumed my engagement. By the way, I saw your friend Lord Danvers the other day. He had obtained some clue respecting Gaspard Ducroix, and was off to follow it up. But I suppose you know that?"

"Yes ; he wrote to me about it."

His thoughts were at variance with his words. The music of her voice had never seemed so sweet as now. He looked at her, and wondered no longer that men had gone mad for her smile. He was like one in enchantment, and ceremonies, and customs, and conventionalities were all forgotten. Burning words rose to his lips—words which told of the lesson he had learnt in absence, and, while veiling love, yet betrayed it all too well.

She listened in silence, but her heart was moved as it had never been by any word of passion or remembrance. Yet she turned aside his meaning with the skill of one well used to fence with man's adoration.

"You honour me too much," she said. "I had not expected you would remember me. You left so suddenly—without a word. Yes ; I know. You could not help it. We cannot always control circumstances. Still I thought I had been long forgotten."

"That you cannot mean," said Cecil impulsively. "You must know that to forget you is a task beyond most men's strength."

"But you are no woman's slave ; you have told me they are nothing to you."

"And they are—save only one," he said in a low voice. "She has condemned me to pay dearly for my previous heresies."

She laughed a little. "In what coin, monsieur ? Empty

speech and idle compliment! They are too common to be of any value."

"That I can well believe," answered Cecil bitterly. "I suppose even the fact of such coin having been untendered hitherto to any living woman could not make it of any worth in your eyes."

"I think nothing is of any worth in my eyes," she said sadly, and her glance rested for a moment on the troubled face beside her. "I wish I could avoid the acknowledgment, but I cannot."

"It may not be so always," said Cecil impulsively. "Your life is not half lived yet. How can you tell that it will be always empty as you say? Or, indeed, if it be, the fault must lie with yourself."

"Perhaps it does. As I told you before, I live but for one purpose, and it has stamped upon my heart an endless bitterness. Its memory suffices to drive away all softness and womanly feeling. See how frank I am with you. I have not cared to spare any man yet. I have let him believe the best before I showed the worst. To you I have at least been honest. You know me as I am. Is not that sufficient to drive me from your memory?"

"No; because I believe you magnify the evil and conceal the good. Your very frankness but appeals more strongly to my faith in you."

"Your faith in me!" she echoed, and a faint flush rose to her cheek as her eyes met his frank impetuous gaze. "Ah, Heaven, to think that I should hear such words from any man's lips! What groundwork have you for such faith, my young Sir Galahad?"

Cecil coloured at the mocking words.

"It pleases you to jest, madame. I have never asked myself that question. I only know that I have spoken the simple truth."

Woman of the world as she was, those simple earnest words touched her profoundly. The smile left her lips—the coldness died out of her eyes. "You do me too much honour," she said gently. "I have not been accustomed to overmuch deference from men. Naturally I should not complain. A woman who lives in the glare of publicity must expect to have her name handled by every passing touch. She has no right to resent it. Of course not. The world says so, and the world is always right—especially when it stones a woman."

"The world and I have little in common," said Cecil Calverley.

"No; you are too chivalrous, too trusting, and too careless

of its doctrines, I should say. It may be the worse for you. Worldly wisdom is a good thing in its way. How is it we always drift into personalities—you and I?"

"For myself I can answer. My thoughts are too full of you to turn to indifferent subjects."

"I wish they were more worthily occupied," she said, with a sort of pitying compassion that chilled him more than her raillery had done.

"If I am satisfied, what matters the rest?" he said quickly. "They say we are not free agents in any matter—that action, life, thought, are all shaped and controlled for us by some governing and mysterious power. I cannot control my thoughts of you any more than I can account for the impulse that led me to the theatre that fatal night. Do not blame me, madame—blame fate."

"You believe in fate, then?"

"I do—now."

Her heart gave a quicker throb—her face grew troubled. "It would have been better if you had never seen me," she said involuntarily. "Whatever you believe can make no difference now. My life has passed into the shadow of calumny. I defy the world, and the world repays me in its own coin. I will not say that I am blameless. I am utterly indifferent and utterly reckless. I think sometimes of my youth, and shudder as I look on myself now. The dreams that I dreamt, the hopes that I hoped—alas! for them there is no resurrection!"

"Why talk of what might have been?" cried Cecil impatiently. "I have seen you—I have known you. Can anything alter those facts? Let the world think what it may, if you yourself know the world is wrong. As for me, your warning comes too late. Forget you, I cannot—avoid you I *will* not, unless it be your express command."

She grew very pale. It was almost a declaration of love, and what could love be to her now any more than to him? "I did not think you were so hot-headed, Mr. Calverley," she said somewhat coldly. "If you will be wise in time, then take my warning. If you will not take it, do not blame me in the future for what I would willingly save you now. My friendship is rarely a welcome gift. Though between us lives ever the remembrance of the debt I owe you, I would almost you had sought its payment in any other way."

"I shall never blame you," said Cecil sadly. "I only ask that you will not cast me quite aside—that you will not forbid me your presence. Is that too presumptuous a request?"

"From you to me—no. But you remember too well. It is for that reason I would rather you asked me anything but this."

"If it be my own choice to risk the danger——"

"Those are rash words. They do not suit you. Besides, you make me seem both vain and egotistical. Well, let us say no more on the matter. It shall be as you wish. Now I am going to dismiss you. I have a rehearsal to attend. Shall you be at the theatre this evening?"

"No," he said almost fiercely. "There, of all places, I hate to see you."

She lifted her eyebrows in faint surprise. "Do not idealise me, whatever you do," she said ironically. "Believe me what I am to the world. It may not be my best side, but it is my truest."

"Nay, you do yourself injustice. Your best side is something different to that."

"We will not drift into another argument on the subject of myself," she answered lightly. "Then come to supper if you will not go to the theatre. I shall be alone to-night, except for Madame Bontoux."

"I shall be only too happy."

"Farewell, then," and she gave him her hand and smiled up into his eyes.

That smile went with him through the day.

CHAPTER XIV

We wring from our souls their applicative strength.

E. B. Browning.

PERE JEROME was pacing up and down his velvet-hung sanctuary with a restless impatience that his calm, equable temperament rarely betrayed. As a rule, he was too well governed by self-deception, too accustomed to conceal feelings with that cloak of gentle indifference, to suffer any outward display of inward emotion to escape.

"She could not have played me false," he muttered. "No; she knows better than that. All these weeks and nothing done. The child a rival of a woman, and such a woman! It is incredible."

He threw himself down and leaned his cheek on his hand, pursuing his thoughts in silence, but with frowning brow. He was a singularly handsome man, with the polished grace and courtly manners of a Church dignitary, and the patent of nobility that is given by a great and ancient race. He was wont to trace his descent from a princely recluse, who, wearied of the vanities and evils of Court life, had taken

refuge in the seclusion of the sanctuary, and veiled his name under the patronymic of a monastical brotherhood.

Be that as it may, Père Jerome stood high in the estimation of his fraternity, and was accounted a singularly astute and valuable member of the church he served. He was a skilled diplomatist, an accomplished scholar, and a thoroughly delightful companion ; but he had one weakness, and that was an unsparing hatred of the Earl of Strathavon's second son. From his boyhood upwards the priest had spared no pains to thwart his inclinations—to oppose his wishes—to fan the flame of his father's indifference into deeper dislike, and the fact of being met on all points by a spirit as immovable and self-controlled as his own only made him more determined to bend or break it.

The old Earl, indifferent as he was to Cecil, had yet too stern a sense of justice to be quite as merciless to his heresies and eccentricities as his priestly adviser would have desired. Of any of his sons, Cecil was the least troublesome—the least extravagant ; the one whose income was always sufficient for his expenses, and who had never appealed for payment of debts. He could find no fault in him save for vagrant wanderings and avoidance of society, and as his brothers amply atoned for deficiencies in that respect, Cecil met all rebuke and remonstrance with a laughing reminder that his allowance would not cover the demands of a yearly town season and its attendant expenses. There was so much truth in the statement that his father could only content himself with flinging a sarcasm at his vagabond tastes, and a hint that he had better not disgrace his family by a too great indulgence in them.

The quiet scorn of the eyes that met his own, the tranquil rejoinder, “Do not fear *that*,” made the old Earl uncomfortable for long after his son had left his presence.

It was twelve months now since they had met, and he had confided to Père Jerome that Cecil had sent an intimation of his forthcoming arrival, and was about to bring his friend Lord Danvers with him.

This was the news that had so disturbed the worthy priest. He always disliked Cecil's presence at the Castle, and Lord Danvers was equally objectionable to him.

Sitting there, in deep meditation—going over again and again schemes that Cecil Calverley had thwarted, plans that he had opposed, secrets that he had divined—no wonder Père Jerome's brow grew dark, no wonder that his eyes rested wrathfully on the perfumed note by his elbow, and the words which were written there, “I have failed to do your bidding. I cannot keep him.”

"Women are poor tools at best," he muttered wrathfully, "though powerful enough in their way. One can never depend on them quite. I could almost think she was over-scrupulous for once. As a rule, she finds it no hard task to chain men to her side. Surely a boy—young, ardent, imaginative, chivalrous, as Cecil is, cannot have been quite untouched. The very fact of that romantic rescue should have sufficed to first attach him to her. For the rest—where has her power gone that she could not keep him?"

He sat down at his writing-table and wrote several letters; then rang a silver bell beside him, and inquired of the servant who answered the summons whether the Earl was ready to receive him.

Being answered in the affirmative, he took his way to Lord Strathavon's apartments; all the gloom and disturbance banished from his brow; the smiling, courteous suavity of mien and manner as undisturbed as usual. The old Earl was just recovering from a severe attack of gout, and lay on his couch in a very irritable and petulant frame of mind. Perhaps a visit from his lawyer had something to do with both, for that gentleman was folding up some ominous-looking parchments as the priest entered.

"Ah, it is you, father," said the Earl; "pray be seated. I have just finished with Mr. Falkener. Infernal worry these business matters."

"I am extremely sorry to have been compelled to trouble you, my lord," said the lawyer apologetically; "but it was necessary to have your signature, and——"

"Yes, yes, I know," interposed the Earl petulantly, and waving his hand as a sign of dismissal. "You will find luncheon prepared for you in the morning-room, Mr. Falkener; and pray, don't trouble me about leases and mortgages for a long time to come."

The lawyer bowed himself out of the room. Père Jerome looked quickly up. The word "mortgages" struck on his ear with an unpleasant sound.

"It is Malden's extravagance again," said the Earl gloomily, as he found himself alone with his spiritual adviser. "I wish he would marry. There is Lady Fortescue and her quarter of a million simply waiting for his asking, and he won't ask. What does it matter if she is a widow, and not over-young? The money will be our salvation just now; but those sons of mine are as obstinate as mules. My wishes go for nothing. You know, of course, that Cecil comes home to-night?"

"Yes, my lord. He brings Lord Danvers also, does he not?"

"Yes. I don't know what makes them choose such a time for their visit. They might just as well have waited for the shooting season, when we should have had the house full. As it is, they will have to console themselves with each other's company."

"Does Mr. Cecil propose making a long stay?"

"He does not say. I should scarcely fancy he would. I mean to ask him about this foundling of his when I see him."

"Do you think it wise, my lord? Mr. Cecil objects to having his actions interfered with. You know that of old."

The Earl laughed scornfully. "I can dispense with your counsels on that subject, holy father. I will manage my sons in my own fashion."

"Pardon me. I never meant to advise you on that point, my lord. I know that Mr. Cecil is always ready to confide in you, and more inclined to listen to your advice than either of his brothers."

"Cecil is a fool," muttered the old Earl savagely. "Keep him out of my way as much as you can. He always irritates me with his democratic ideas and ultra-Liberalism. As for his passion for art and craze for painting, Heaven only knows how he has come by them, or how long the whim is to last."

"If his views are liberal his fancies are patrician," remarked Père Jerome thoughtfully. "He is proud enough of his race and scrupulous enough of his honour, at all events. Let me see, it is twelve months since he was here, is it not?"

"Yes; but why speak of him so much? I want to consult you about Malden. It is imperative that he should marry, and that soon. Can you not use your influence with him? I would go up to London myself, only my health renders it impossible. What do you say to being my ambassador?"

"Willingly, my lord. But if I might advise, I should say invite Lady Fortescue here in the sporting season. There is nothing like throwing people together in a country mansion. They see so much more of each other than they can in the whirl of the season, and Lord Malden is always at his best, I think, when playing the host at Strathavon. Meanwhile I will pave the way and—ascertain that there is no one else."

"Heavens! I hope not," exclaimed the Earl abruptly. "You have not heard anything of that sort, have you?"

"Only vague rumours—nothing that you need distress yourself about, my lord," said the priest soothingly. "But as there is no smoke without fire, I may as well investigate into the cause of the former. Rest assured I will let you know if there is any reason for anxiety."

The conversation then turned to other matters, and after half an hour or so of further discussion, the priest retired to his own apartments.

It wanted half an hour of dinner-time when Cecil Calverley and Lord Danvers arrived at the Castle. The meeting between father and son was scarcely warmer than if they had parted an hour before, instead of, as in reality, a year. The dinner would have been but a dull affair save for Père Jerome's unwearied efforts to banish the somewhat taciturn element that was only too apparent.

The Earl looked gloomy and dissatisfied, Cecil was visibly preoccupied and ill at ease, Lord Danvers unusually silent, and the priest alone seemed thoroughly at home and unconstrained. It was a relief to all when the stately meal was at last over, and the two young men rose from the table and went out on the terrace to smoke their cigars. Cecil's was a poor pretence of enjoying the fragrant weed. His eyes rested with a half-regretful pleasure on the beautiful scene before him, on the sloping terraces, the aisles of woodland, the wide-stretching deer forests, the glimpses of fertile country, the far-off curve of the coast rocks that held the sea thundering at their base. A grand place—a noble heritage indeed, and with all his restlessness and love of change Cecil Calverley felt that no spot on earth was, after all, so dear as this, his boyhood's home.

Lord Malden cared very little for it; had no enthusiastic reverence for the magnificent Gothic pile with its battlements, towers, and fretted pinnacles, and history of mingled recklessness, and chivalry, and romance. He preferred the town house in Park Lane, he was wont to say, to all the stately grandeur of Strathavon, and only tolerated the Castle during the brief shooting months, when the whirl of the season was over, and he was perforce obliged to leave his beloved modern Babylon. But Cecil loved his home in a very different fashion, and his brother's indifference was often a source of displeasure and uneasiness both.

"How silent you are, Cecil!" remarked his friend at last. "Not one observation for the last five minutes. Haven't you exhausted your admiration yet?"

"You forget how long I have been absent," answered Cecil apologetically. "After all, foreign lands can show us nothing nobler in their way than these 'stately homes of England.'"

"I agree with you there. Still, they are a trifle dull to live in for long, don't you think?"

"You heretic! Can one never raise you to a moment's forgetfulness of mere selfish advantages?" laughed Cecil.

"*Cui bono?*" asked Lord Danvers with a shrug of his

shoulders. "One must live ; and as one can only live once, it is best to get as much benefit out of things in general as might or right can secure. Selfish, perhaps, but wise, all the same. Don't you think so ?"

"Yes," said Cecil with a faint sigh. "Humanity is all more or less selfish."

"Naturally. We can't avoid it. No one will trouble to look after us if we don't look after ourselves. To do the best for oneself is really a virtue, if you only look at it in the right way. I am more material than yourself, as you know, and life is an infinitely more prosaic thing than your dreams would make of it ; believe that."

"Yet you have had your romance ?"

"To my cost—yes. Perhaps that is why I see no charm in anything or anyone now. I cannot tell. I suppose you do *enjoy* more than I do. You see so much, and fancy so much, and idealise so much. But to neither of us, I suppose, will there come content. I am ambitious, you——"

"Well, why do you pause ?" laughed Cecil. "I am *not*. Is that it ?"

"Not exactly. I was wondering whether you also had not set yourself some goal to reach. Life will not be always a dream to you."

"Indeed, I hope not. It is scarcely that now."

"I fancy there is a difference about you, somehow," remarked Lord Danvers. "You have changed in some way. I can't explain how. I noticed it when we met in London. What were you doing with yourself in Paris after your philanthropic mission was over ?"

The dusky evening light hid the sudden flush that rose to Cecil's cheek. He laughed, but the laugh was uncertain and mirthless.

"What should I have been doing ? Finishing the copy of my picture, and roaming about the Bois and Boulevards, abjuring fashionable society and revelling in untrammelled freedom."

"Yes ; that is what I should have expected. Did you go and see our friend Faustine at the —— Theatre." She is acting again."

"Thanks, no. One edition of that nonsense was enough for me. As your cigar is done, Danvers, suppose we adjourn to my 'den.' I sent over a lot of things from abroad awhile ago, and I want your opinion about arranging them."

"With all my heart. That artistic sanctum of yours is my *beau idéal* of a room. I wish mine at Calsthorpe could be induced to look like it."

And Lord Danvers followed his friend into the "den" alluded to with a careless laugh on his lips.

There may be unbounded confidence between two men until just so long as a woman has no influence over one or other. It is more rare for men to give their love confidences than for women. The feminine mind is essentially one that craves for sympathy in matters touching the heart, and few indeed are the instances where it would keep solely and entirely to itself the history of a conquest, or the sweetness of a love-secret.

Cecil Calverley had not breathed a word to Lord Danvers of his renewed acquaintance with Faustine; had said nothing of those enchanting suppers, those morning *tête-à-tête* with which that week of his stay in Paris had been filled. Nothing either of the passion that had stolen upon him unawares, until his life now seemed a sweet, tumultuous dream, filled with the smiles and words and memory of but one woman. It was a siren's spell lulling his senses, yet with the vague fear of an awaking ever present. At times he felt restless and dissatisfied and vaguely distrustful of her. At other moments the sadness and melancholy that breathed through her words and threw their shadow over the outward brilliance of her life, only appealed more forcibly to him by reason of that very distrust.

Words of love she would not listen to, though she knew they were for ever burning on his lips, and only restrained by severe effort. Careless as she was of the world, and what it chose to say, Cecil Calverley could not but see that she was too proud and too disdainful of all men to really merit the reputation that world gave her.

"No man has ever had the power to move me," she told him once, with that cool, negligent grace which so often chilled him in her presence. "I think in my own heart I despise them too much!"

A far vainer and more experienced man than Cecil Calverley would have been puzzled and doubtful of his own power or of her meaning, and would have felt, as Cecil did, that his admission to her presence and her gracious friendliness were not by any means sure ground on which to base the smallest hope. A week of such intoxication had bound her chains more surely round him. Then he had been forced to leave her, and she had not uttered any regret, or by word or look bidden him to stay. Only at parting, when something of his pain had betrayed itself in a passionate entreaty to seek her again when his visit to England was over, she had answered, "You are too loyal for the age you live in—the world in which we move. Go home and forget me; it is the wisest thing you can do—indeed, I mean it."

"If forgetfulness was impossible before, what is it now?" asked Cecil sadly. "Your warning comes too late."

'There are few warnings of which *that* may not be said.
And this was the woman who had written to Père Jerome,
"I cannot keep him."

CHAPTER XV

For my heart is set
On what hurts me, I know not why.
Swinburne.

CECIL CALVERLEY'S "den" was indeed worthy of his friend's admiring appreciation.

It was a large room with an immense bay window, commanding a fine view of the park and the great woods beyond. A square of Turkey carpet lay on the oak floor, a few Eastern rugs made spots of rich colouring here and there. Over the mantel-board of embossed leather was a large mirror in a rich carved oak frame. The great tiled fireplace beneath was filled with ferns and grasses. A grand piano stood in one corner, with piles of music beside it. A few deep, softly-cushioned lounging-chairs were scattered about. Rare bronzes stood on the chimney-piece and on the dark oaken brackets on the wall. The drapery of the windows was of rich dark maroon plush, which now looked almost brown in the mellow gleam of the lamplight. The subdued tints of the room were relieved by a few exquisite water-colours on the wall, and some great bronze jars of ferns which stood on an oaken console table in the embrasure of the windows. A large easel was resting in the corner. A table near by was littered with portfolios of sketches, uncut novels, and papers, and on another smaller table was a liqueur-stand, and an array of cut-glass bottles and tumblers.

A few marbles, perfect in their way, gleaned here and there among the more sober tones of colouring; a great bowl of flowers stood on the piano, filling the air with fragrance, and in the careless arrangements and picturesque litter was just that element of untidiness which is essentially manlike, and gave a look of comfort and "livableness" to the whole room.

Cecil looked round it and smiled, well satisfied.

"Melford has done his work, I see," he remarked, as his eyes rested on the flowers, and the glittering array of glass, and piles of purple grapes, and cool, sparkling lumps of ice in their silver pails. "It is like the old days again, is it not, Vere?"

"Yes," answered his friend, throwing himself down on one

of the inviting-looking chairs, and proceeding to light a cigar. "Dear old days! What jolly times we used to have here, Cis!"

"If time would only stand still," half sighed Cecil, as he also drew up a chair to the open window and gazed out on the moonlit beauty of leafage, and the wavering shadows that fell athwart the smooth green turf. "We really don't know that we are happy as the moment passes on. Afterwards—when we look back——"

"Heydey, Cecil! What has come to you? Look back? You have not had to do that yet, surely?"

"No, no; of course not," laughed Cecil; but the laugh was somewhat embarrassed, and he did not meet his friend's eyes. "Fine effect that moonlight on the avenue. I feel inclined to make a sketch of it."

"Queer people, you artists," murmured Lord Danvers lazily. "Always thinking of effects. Nature seems to play the part of a perpetual model to you. Doesn't that constant desire for reproduction spoil a good deal of your enjoyment?"

"I don't find it so. Art speaks to us of Nature and Nature of Art. They go hand in hand, beautifying and glorifying each other. The desire for reproduction, as you term it, is more like an involuntary utterance of the admiration and enthusiasm within, than the wish to make that admiration subservient to the skill of a copyist."

"Not badly put," said Lord Danvers, helping himself to the sparkling wine beside him. "But my experience of your fraternity is simply what I have stated. The grandest, or simplest, or most picturesque piece of Nature's handiwork serves only to awaken the impulse to reproduce it. Such a feeling must lessen the simple effortless appreciation which only feeds itself on the beauty it sees, and is content."

"But its appreciation is not so keen, and its memory is but brief."

"Well, to the outsiders who are ignorant of the science and execution of Art, the admiration of the moment is quite sufficient. I almost envy that class of persons who enjoy what is on the surface, and—ask no more."

"A very stunted existence at best," said Cecil gravely. "I have heard of 'the bleak horror of fruitless days.' The people you speak of must own that experience, I should imagine."

"But to them the days would not be bleak or fruitless. Who feels the loss of what they never possessed? The sublimest philosophy is to enjoy and 'ask not wherefore.'"

"And would you call that enjoyment which looks on Art

and sees no hidden meaning ; which gazes at the wonders of Nature and reads in them no deeper lesson ; to which all that appealed to the soul was stifled in the channels of materialism ; and to which the utterance of Divine truths and the sublimity of genius were alike incomprehensible ; where all the colour and beauty and fulness and fragrance of ' mind life ' could find no entrance and excite no wonder ? Why, it is a prostitution of the name to so apply it ? ”

“ I like to warm you up to a pitch of enthusiasm,” smiled Lord Danvers. “ When will you be convinced that in the world such individuals as yourself are the exception, not the rule ? High falutin doesn't pay, and Art is all very well so long as you haven't to make a living out of it. In plain words, my dear Cecil, it is better to have a big balance at your banker's than the intellect of a Chatterton, or the genius of a Schubert. Cultivate the intellect and the genius by all means, if Nature has served you so ill a turn as to dower you with one or other ; but don't expect that all the rest of the world will stop to listen to your verses, or admire your music ; and don't call it ungrateful if it deems transfers and shares and Stock Exchange speculations of tenfold more importance ! Humanity is very material, and you can't alter it, preach how you may. Now you are fortunate ; you choose to pursue Art in a *dilettante* fashion, and find yourself crowned as famous. You are not dependant on Fortune, therefore she smiles on you. You can live in luxury, and work at your ease, and enjoy every artistic delight that the world can give. But for one person placed as you are, there must be hundreds to whom the bondage of genius is the curse of life, who are fettered and curbed at every point by the sordid needs of that material essence you despise, and are no more free to make life what they would, than the veriest slave who crouches under the lash of a merciless taskmaster.”

“ Yet better that than the mere mediocrity which is so dull and easily satisfied, and so sleek and well fed. If suffering too often be the artist's lot, it is through suffering also he has taught his grandest lessons. Despair is a greater master than Content, and it is rare that the highest wages have repaid the highest achievements.”

“ They learn in suffering what they teach in song,” murmured Lord Danvers musingly. “ Ah, poor Shelley ! through what bitterness and weariness did he wade ere he made those words immortal ! I always think poets are a class to be intensely pitied ; and, after all, in their way they are as mad as any inmate of Bedlam. The maniac says to the world, ' I am an emperor,' and believes it. The poet tells of

the winds that speak and the flowers that whisper—that where we see a cloud is an angel's face, or a river of emerald. He hears voices in earth, and air, and water, and calls on the rest of humanity to hear them also; he sees divinity in a face that is simply mortal, and marvels the world does not also worship. We might just as well say, 'There are no voices; that is no divinity,' as we tell the poor lunatic, 'You are no emperor.' The one hugs his paper crown, and is convinced he is right; the other—well, the other smiles pityingly on his fellow-beings and says: 'You are deaf and blind; I alone can hear and see!'"

"You most prosaic and cynical of reasoners!" laughed Cecil. "Go and give me some music, and leave Art alone. There at least you can forget to be utterly sceptical and material. It is long since I have heard you sing; it will be a treat. If to your idea Poetry is only 'misrepresentation,' at least Music, its twin-sister, is something better and different, else whence comes the passion you put into song, and the meaning that notes and harmonies convey?"

"Music is greater than any poetry," said Lord Danvers, sauntering slowly over to the piano as he spoke.

"But is sooner forgotten," said Cecil quickly. "Few melodies, however beautiful, can haunt one's mind or waken such a train of thought as one sweet subtle utterance of a poet will do. Besides, music may mean so much to one, so little to another. It is more the mind that receives it than the utterance itself, that is of importance. Sound is vague in comparison with words, you must acknowledge that. You mock at the poet for seeing a river in a cloud, or hearing voices in the wind, or music in the stream, or divinity where all is mortal, but what of the musician who says this passage represents sorrow or joy, or anguish or death, a storm or a calm, a moonlight night or a winter's day? Given the phrase to an audience unaware of its intended meaning, how many could interpret it aright, do you think?"

"Just as many as would comprehend the meaning of a picture or the subtleties of a poem," laughed his friend. "Of course all art demands a certain amount of education before it can be appreciated, and too often demands it in vain. Still, I think music appeals more directly than poetry. The most illiterate, the most depraved, the most commonplace people will often evince unbounded delight at the one and be utterly untouched by, or incapable of comprehending, the other. Music speaks in a universal tongue—poetry in an exceptional one. Both are beautiful—divine if you will—but where one is felt by a million hearts the other is understood by scarce a hundred minds. And, after all, as

feeling rules the world more powerfully than understanding, the musician has the advantage of the poet, just as the painter has of the sculptor. Marble is cold in comparison with colour. It may be grander, more perfect, more majestic, but it *appeals* less powerfully to sight and sense.

Then, to close the argument, he sat down at the great Broadwood, and soon his rich baritone voice was filling the room with melody as he poured out the music of a grand opera given to the Parisian world that season.

Cecil Calverley sat by the window and listened—the quiet moonlight silvering all the sward—the gleam of starshine resting on the masses of foliage. An hour like this he had been wont to enjoy often in his friend's company; good-natured argument, combated prejudices, and such music as well-trained talent of no common order could pour out from the treasure-house of memory. Lord Danvers rarely looked at notes. He had a vast acquaintance with both classical and modern composers, and would play and sing by the hour together, once the fancy seized him. In this quiet hour, with Cecil for his only listener, he poured out such glorious melodies as no drawing-room audience could ever have persuaded him to give for all their smiles and beseeching. But his listener's thoughts were far away for once—had crossed the seas and mists of the Channel, and flown to the presence of a woman whose mirthful laugh was ringing at that moment across a delighted crowd, whose graceful figure floated through the mazes of the dance; yet who, even while her light feet glided over the stage, was saying in her heart, "Does he remember still?"

He did remember—only too well; but that she could not know.

A tall dark figure, pacing up and down the terrace, saw that absorbed face by the open window in the mingled glow of light from within and without the room; saw it, and came nearer and nearer, unobserved by the eyes that were gazing far away beyond the silver leaves and falling shadows.

And as the priest stood beneath the window and watched that thoughtful profile, and noted the dreaming far-off look in the upturned eyes, he smiled softly to himself, saying, "Is it of her he thinks?"

"I have been enjoying the music, Mr. Cecil," he said aloud. "What a night, is it not, and the music suits it. The scene is perfect, I think—at least to me. Doubtless for you it needs another attraction."

"And what may that be?" asked Cecil, looking coldly down on his arch enemy, and little thankful for the interruption to his thoughts.

"A woman's presence," said Père Jerome softly. "Moonlight and music—what are they without the charm of sweet lips and soft eyes?"

Cecil's face grew scarlet.

"I should scarcely have expected to hear such a sentiment from you, holy father," he said coldly.

The priest laughed—his slow suave laugh. "My habit teaches self-denial, and preaches against worldly vanities; but I do not forget what life is to youth, and such youth as yours. Artistic, fanciful, poetic—full of dreams that are divine, and visions that are glorious. Yet would you know a beauty fairer than dreams—visions more glorious than Art can imagine—a life perfected as it has never been yet, live out the magic of such a night as this, with all its glory mirrored back only by two eyes that love you, and all the rapture of existence breathed out on lips that rest upon your own."

The words, blending in unison with the burning thoughts of his own mind, the impassioned memories of the last week, the lingering echoes of the music's dying strains, fired Cecil's blood to fever-heat, and stifled his anger with their insidious tempting.

He could not speak, though a thousand thoughts were thronging to his brain; the tumultuous ecstasy, the subtle tempting of those words thrilled to the very core of his heart, and brought back to memory the face and fascinations of the woman he believed he loved.

He forgot the priest. He thought no more of answering his words; he only heard them silently, with that flush on his cheek, that nameless, passionate longing in his heart. He knew what the magic of the night wanted, what the music lacked, what had left his life incomplete, and with the sigh that spent itself on the silence, he woke from his trance of delirium, and found his friend by his side.

As Vere Danvers' hand touched his arm he shook it off impatiently. As his laughing voice reached his ears, he answered it with ill-concealed petulance. Never before had the perfect accord of their friendship been disturbed. Never before had Cecil Calverley felt that Lord Danvers' presence was a restraint. But then, never before had stood between him and his friend the shadow of—a woman's presence.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

CONFIDENCES AND MISTRUST

To most men it would have seemed that Strathavon at this season of the year—with no guests at the Castle, no sport in the woods, only the somewhat unexciting pastime of fishing, and their own company in the billiard and music room—was dull, to say the least of it. Yet neither Cecil nor Vere appeared to find it so.

They had come for a rest, they both declared laughingly; and a rest they seemed to have. Lazy saunterings through the lonely woods; mornings spent with rod and line; long rides through the surrounding country; evenings given up to music and the bantering, cynical arguments they both delighted in; theological discussions with Père Jerome, who exerted himself on every occasion to amuse and entertain, and showed himself in so agreeable a light to Lord Danvers that he declared Cecil had been prejudiced against the worthy father, and that neither horn nor hoof could be concealed beneath the good-natured courtesy and gracious frankness of the confessor's manner.

A week had drifted by like this, when another attack of gout confined the Earl to his chamber, and threw the two young men more entirely together. It was then that Lord Danvers began to discover a certain restlessness and irritability in Cecil's manner that was certainly foreign to his experience.

He marvelled at it, even as he had marvelled on that night of their arrival, when the first petulant reproach he had ever heard from Cecil's lips had answered his laughing inquiry as to the nature of his dreams in the starlight. But to ask for a confidence withheld was a thing he could never have done; and he made no remark, only waited until his friend should himself explain an alteration so sudden and self-evident.

Cecil, however, said nothing. He was not himself aware that there was such an alteration, or, at least, that it was apparent. Certainly there were times when solitude was sweeter to him than either converse or amusement, but he never gave outward expression to the feeling, and so deemed it unknown.

There are times when, like the bird of the desert, we blind

ourselves and deem that we are unseen of others ; and at no time is this folly so apparent as in the earliest stage of a first passion.

For the first time in his life Cecil Calverley had something to conceal, and concealment was foreign to his frank open temperament. He was thankful that Lord Danvers asked nothing of that week in Paris ; and yet, looking back on it, it seemed as if there was nothing to conceal. Such frank intercourse, such languid indifference, such a sure but unspoken restraint laid like a chain on any impulsive utterance that his lips longed to breathe, such gracious acceptance of his courtesies, such hours of enchantment brilliant with the wit and grace and talent of this one woman—that was all. Enough to bewilder himself, enough to have made that week a paradise ; yet nothing to look back upon with any hope, nothing that could lay to rest his vague doubts, or in any way frame his enchantress into his ideal portrait of womanhood.

In these days of absence he thought of her much and often, but there was no comfort in those thoughts, no peace in those bewildering memories. If she had divined his love she had also fostered it as only a thorough coquette could have done ; and he knew from her own words that this was how she dealt with all men—that caprice alone ruled her life, and revenge repaid her lovers. He hated himself that he had disregarded her own warning—that, like the moth, he had fluttered to the flame, scorching himself in its lustre as sole payment of his folly.

“Alas ! my dreams !” he muttered to himself now, with no less sad a regret than she had felt as she breathed the same words.

In solitude he saw his madness more clearly. What was there in this love honourable or hopeful ? What—even supposing he might move her heart—could this woman be to him ? The answer was clear enough and plain enough for even his eyes to read ; but, ah ! when did ever so plain a reading of love’s sweet folly suffice to banish its remembrance, or ease its pain ?

“I will see her no more,” he told himself, and even as he told it his heart was longing for her presence ; his ears were hungry for the faintest sound of her voice ; his eyes, that looked out on earth, and stars, and sky, saw nothing of their beauty or their lustre, for both alike were dimmed by the loveliness of a human face.

No wonder that, with such feelings burning in his heart, waking to keen regret and fresh-given pain with every sight and sound of Art and Nature, he found it no easy task to be

his usual frank careless self, to blind his friend's eyes, because he dared not ask his sympathy, or betray his own folly.

A woman whose reputation the world's scorn had tossed to and fro—of whom it spoke with a smile and adored with a homage that was degradation—a woman who had herself acknowledged that the passion of men's lives, the ardour of their worship, were alike instruments for an ignoble vengeance—what could such a woman be worth, even though her gratitude should ripen into love as wild and fervent as his own? What indeed?

It did not bear thinking of; it was an infatuation that defied calm sense or cool reasoning, and yet there it was, regardless of both, eating his heart out in fierce despair and wild longing and tumultuous pain; a thing he loved and hated, despised and feared; yet a thing that was all his life, whose shadow fell across its sunlight, whose memory held every thought in a bondage that laughed to scorn the philosophies and creeds of his past, and cried to Reason, "I am your master—now."

Yet, if the world were wrong, if lovers and friends were ignorant of the real nature of the woman they alternately scourged and worshipped, might not there be something in her more noble than they dreamed—a greatness of which they knew nothing?

The thought swept across his mind as lightly and tenderly as the breath of the wind that fanned his brow in those woodland solitudes where he had wandered. It was sweet, subtle, and dangerous, for it lent her a sorcery greater than her beauty—a sympathy that outrivalled her fascinations.

"Oh, my love, my love, to know you worthy!" he cried despairingly. "What would matter my own pain then?"

If Faustine could have heard those words she would have known that for the first time in all her brilliant, capricious, triumphant life, she was *worthily* loved.

"Where have you buried yourself all this lovely afternoon?" asked Lord Danvers, some two hours later, as he met Cecil sauntering homewards through the park. "Ah! been sketching, I see. What have you done?"

"Nothing worth showing," answered Cecil, holding back his portfolio.

It was no woodland scene or forest glade that his pencil had traced there. Only a face, perfect in its loveliness, proud in its sovereignty—a face with a Circe's beauty, yet a Magdalene's compassion; and under it was written the name he loathed and hated for its false meaning and its recklessly borne significance—the name of "Faustine!"

"You are growing lazy, Cis," resumed his friend banteringly. "This is not the first time that you have spent hours in solitude with apparently nothing to show for them. I shall imagine you have discovered some woodland divinity, and are employing her as a model. You might show me your sketch, if only as proof or—refutation."

"Nonsense!" murmured Cecil, looking uncomfortable. "Sylvan divinities are not in my line; you know that."

"True," said Lord Danvers, pausing a moment to light his cigar. "By the way; Cis, I have had a letter from that French detective this morning. I wanted to consult you about it."

"The fellow that sent you off on that last wild-goose chase? Between ourselves, Vere, I have not much opinion of him."

"He says," went on Lord Danvers, unheeding his friend's remark, "that a man answering Ducroix's description——"

"For the *third* time," remarked Cecil *en parenthèse*.

"Don't interrupt; it's bad form. Well, that such a man has been traced to a little *auberge* near the Italian frontier, a little out-of-the-way-place enough. This man came there at night with *one* child and disappeared next day, leaving it behind to the care of an Italian who was travelling with a troupe of strolling players."

"But our friend had *two* children with him," remarked Cecil.

"Yes; that is what makes me doubtful on the point."

"Well, I should certainly wait for more authentic information before rushing off in pursuit again," said Cecil. "You know the last clue ended in nothing. I think detectives are great fools. They will try and make circumstances fit into their own opinions of a case, instead of shaping those opinions to circumstances. A detective who starts with a preconceived idea of who his 'man' is and what he will do, is about as much use as a beetle. And I told you from the beginning your official had done that."

"He was highly recommended," said Lord Danvers thoughtfully.

"Maybe," answered Cecil. "But he has not displayed any great brilliance yet, as far as I can see. My opinion is that he is persistently following a wrong clue. It is always a man with *one* child who turns up. You can't get over the fact of there being two."

"You are right there. Oh, Cis," he added bitterly, "you have no idea how this affair weighs on my mind. It seems horrible to think I am so baffled—that I, who would give my right hand to fulfil my darling's last wish, am so helpless in the matter!"

"Time and patience will assist you ; nothing else," said Cecil gravely. "Of course it would be a satisfaction to know what has become of the children ; but you could really do nothing for them, however much you desired it. You know that."

"The brute might be bribed," said Lord Danvers bitterly. "He would do anything for money—sell his soul, I believe. I wish to Heaven I could find him !"

"We seem destined to be saddled with other people's children," said Cecil, laughing a little. "What am I to do with my waif when she grows up? Can you advise me there?"

"Make her a nun," answered Lord Danvers quickly. "Safest thing for a woman situated as she will be. You can't give her name, position, and birthright ; you can hardly adopt her without scandal. She will have no claim on you save the charity that the world calls an insult from one of your sex to one of hers. You must do one of two things—have her trained to servitude, or bind her to the seclusion of the sisterhood in whose care she is."

"I would rather see her dead than condemned to the life of a nun !" exclaimed Cecil hotly. "What ! sacrifice her youth, rob her of all the glories of life, the empire of womanhood ?—never ! It would be the act of a murderer."

"Apprentice her to a trade, then."

"My dear Vere—a trade ! Preposterous ! She is of gentle birth, undoubtedly, and as beautiful as the day."

"Well, my dear boy, you asked my advice, and I share the usual fate of people who give that unwelcome article. See, it was petitioned without the slightest intention of being taken. Seriously, I fear your waif will be a little troublesome to you in the future. What a pity it was not a boy, or low-born, or ugly ! As it is——"

"What an ominous pause !" laughed Cecil. "She is none of these. But, after all, why should I trouble about the matter ? Fate, which threw her in my way, will also doubtless provide for her. I am responsible for saving her life, and therefore must do my best for it. For a few years at least she is in safe keeping ; she will be cared for, guarded, educated. Then—well, something will be sure to turn up by that time."

"Her rightful owners, perhaps," remarked Lord Danvers ironically. "Having had her brought up, fed, clothed, and educated free of charge, doubtless they will come forward generously to claim and make use of her."

"Don't be sarcastic, Vere. God knows what unfeeling brute—man or woman—left the child to perish in that wood.

I shall never forget the sight of the little cold, numbed thing, and how she clung to me."

"Terrible omen," murmured Lord Danvers, shaking his head with pathetic regret. "I hope you will never repent your philanthropy, my dear boy. Charity is its own reward, don't they say? Like most aphorisms, it applies itself to circumstances with a virtuous disregard of attendant inconvenience. But charity or not, a lover of freedom like yourself should never have bound your life by any tie. Take my word for it, you will find it a mistake."

"But what could I have done?"

"Made her over to the parish, or sent her to the Foundling Hospital; either would have saved her life equally well, and left yours free."

"Oh, nonsense, Vere; you look at it too seriously. She doesn't interfere with me so much."

"Time proves all things," said Lord Danvers coolly, "except—a woman's faith, or gratitude for benefits. I am not blaming you for what you have done, mind; only, when you talk of your waif growing up to womanhood, it does look as if your office of benefactor might be somewhat onerous."

"'Sufficient unto the day,'" quoted Cecil, throwing himself down on a lovely mound of moss, green as an emerald's hue, soft as only woodland moss can be. A great beech threw its shade over their heads, the babble of a stream made music in the silence, and the sunbeams fell like golden rain among the fresh green-leaves and interlacing boughs.

Lord Danvers followed his friend's example, and stretched his massive limbs in lazy content on that natural couch.

"Lovely spots you have here," he remarked. "One never seems to exhaust them. I don't think I have found my way here before. Well, to return to our subject. Has Père Jerome ever alluded to that *rencontre* in the woods, since you came here?"

"You mean when I found the child? No. Why do you ask?"

"Only because I think it singular if he hasn't. Apart from natural curiosity, I should say the fact of his having directed you to the retreat, or home, or whatever the place is, where you left the child, would have given him an interest in the little one's welfare."

"He is an odd being. There is no comprehending him," murmured Cecil lazily. "I am surprised you seem to get on so well with him, Vere. What do you talk about?"

"Theology, of course; points of doctrine, rituals, and Church ceremonies. What else should we discuss?"

"Is he trying to convert you?"

"Not that I am aware of. I fear it would be waste of time. Like yourself, I am intolerant of priestly governance. There is infinitely more harm done to religion by religion's administrators than by infidels or even atheists. Christ's teaching was as simple as His life. We never hear of His being a stickler for ceremonies and feasts, and loud professions and active persecution. No; those improvements on the sublimity of the Christian religion sprang from the men who preached its doctrines for their own aggrandisement and benefit, their own power and pomp. Yet say this to any dignitary of the Church, whatever be the creed he holds, and how inexpressibly shocked he becomes. Contumacy is of course a deadly sin—none worse. Père Jerome, for all his silken courtesies, is the last man to forget that. Cecil, the more I see of him, the more convinced I am that your life will never own a bitterer foe."

His voice was impressive and earnest, but distinct enough to reach the ears of the very man of whom he spoke.

The priest was sauntering slowly through the park, book in hand, when the sound of voices broke on his ear. Involuntarily he paused among the beechen shadows, and an evil light came into his eyes. The faint cruel smile of a conqueror's amusement stole to his lips.

Cecil spoke now.

"I know that," he said tranquilly; "but I am not afraid. All the wiles of priestcraft cannot do much harm nowadays. He has certainly embittered my father against me; but then he never has shown me much affection. As for the rest, what can it matter? Malden is the heir, and his faith is all right—so far, at least, as outward observances go. I am of little importance."

"How do you know that?" asked Lord Danvers. "There are such things as accidents. Supposing Malden didn't marry, and predeceased yourself; what then? Père Jerome and his *confrères* would miss a goodly slice of Strathavon and its emoluments, I fancy."

The quiet listener's face grew darker. His hand closed more tightly on the bough which he held aside in order to catch the sound of those unconscious voices.

"Oh, nonsense!" murmured Cecil carelessly. "*That* is not probable. We are a long-lived family, and Malden has never had a day's illness."

"But he is reckless and wild."

"So are most of our race, and yet we come into our kingdom in due course. Are you training for diplomacy, Vere, that you first conciliate your foe and then betray him? You and

Father Jerome have seemed the best of friends lately ; now you are reawakening all my old prejudices respecting him."

"The only weapon with which to foil cunning is cunning," said Lord Danvers. "I have been looking after your interests, my boy, because you are too frank and unsuspecting to do that for yourself. I believe—nay, I am almost certain—that the priest has told your father all about the little waif ; and more, that he has implanted a doubt in the Earl's mind respecting your interest in the child."

"Nonsense !" exclaimed Cecil, his face flushing hotly. "Why, in Heaven's name, should he do that ?"

"To suit some purpose of his own, I suppose. He may have many that we do not suspect. Has your father said anything to you on the subject ?"

"Not a word."

"Well, that is no proof that my suspicions are wrong."

"But I fail to see any motive—anything to be gained."

"My dear Cecil, you are no meet opponent for so wily a foe. Rest assured, Père Jerome is one of those men who never do anything without a motive. Because we can see none, does not alter the fact that there is one in his own astute mind. Though, for my own part, I don't believe he could make much mischief between your father and yourself now. You are of age these three years, and Strathavon is entailed."

"Yes ; for the life of me I can't see what he means, or is driving at."

The bough dropped softly back to its place. Velvet-footed as a panther, with that smile still on his lips—that merciless glitter in his dark unfathomable eyes, the silent listener moved away through those woodland solitudes, unsuspected and unobserved.

At dinner that night he had never been more brilliant, more courteous, more entertaining ; yet all the while there burned in his heart a hatred as intense, a vengeance as merciless as had ever given prisoner to the sword or stake in the days of Rome's fiercest and mightiest supremacy.

Yet he played Iscariot's part so perfectly that he almost deceived the two who knew he was playing it.

"Am I wrong, after all ?" said Cecil to himself.

"Should I have suspected him without better reason ?" muttered Lord Danvers.

For the frankness of outspoken antagonism is poorly matched against the wiles and *finesse* of the diplomatist, and the one almost repents its rash prejudices while the other combats them with so subtle a skill that even enmity looks like friendship.

CHAPTER II

A sense of heavy harmonies
 Grew on the growth of patient night,
 More sweet than shapen music is.

IN the obscure little Italian village where Già lived the little slaves he had purchased led but a toilsome and most bitter existence.

The training was arduous and severe, and never relieved by word of kindness or encouragement from the taskmaster. Two of the children were orphans, and their only living relatives had been glad enough to sign that warrant of slavery which Già termed apprenticeship, and to get rid of an obnoxious charge. Quità knew nothing of how or why she had been brought thither. She had been torn from her home in another land, and drugged with anodynes, till suddenly her stupefied senses awoke to the fact that the peace, and freedom, and carelessness of childhood were over—that scanty clothing and coarse food, and incessant railing and blows, and hours of laborious exercise were all that could replace them. She bore all with a fortitude and patience strangely at variance with her years, deeming it a law of nature that she should suffer, even as the more fortunate of her age and sex think it a law of life that they should enjoy. Of knowledge she had none, and might never have had any save for one happy chance that broke across the dull and wearisome path of her life, like a sunbeam on dark waters.

It happened thus.

Già one night brought a friend home with him—an old bent man who had some past claim on his memory or interest, otherwise he would never have crossed that inhospitable threshold. He carried slung on his back an old blackened violin, a time-worn treasure of his own that never left his side, and always seemed part and parcel of himself to those who knew him. Ere they supped, Già summoned the children and bade them dance, while he played. They went through all the mazy evolutions, the graceful gliding motions, the aerial flights and *pas* and *pirouettes* they had learned so laboriously, and when they had done he bade Quità dance alone.

“I will play for her,” said the old musician.

And play he did, in heavenly fashion, with that subtle power that makes eyes weep and hearts quiver in response,

and the music stirred the child's whole nature as she moved to its soft sweet sounds, and kept time to its fantastic rhythm.

Già watched her with satisfied eyes and dismissed her with a curt word. She went silently away from his presence with the memory of those wonderful melodies in her brain and echoing in her ears.

She stole out into the moonlight and dropped on the grass, spent and panting after her exertions. All was quiet around her; the dew was falling in the cups of wild flowers and silvering the stems of the spearlike grasses; a distant stream gleamed through the dim shadows of the trees and spread itself in darkling pools and caught the moonrays in its depths, where the fish were stirring the great snowy lilies and tangled webs of weeds.

Her breathing grew quicker. The intense stillness and beauty of the night, all crowned with stars and fragrant with sweetness, stole like a spell over her senses and hushed them to a kindred calm.

She had long been friendless and desolate; she was ill-fed and heavily tasked; she was ignorant as the untaught peasants around her, and yet she could feel in every sight and sound of Nature a beauty to which they were blind—a language to which they were deaf; for Nature had made her a poet, though man would have had her a slave. Lying here she was content, and content meant happiness to her. The shadows, the lights, the luminance of moon and stars, the murmur of distant waters, the balmy breath of the midsummer night—all held for her a vague entranced delight. With a strange unaccountable impulse she lifted up her young sweet voice, and wedding the melodies she had so lately heard to the childish words of her own fancy, she sang a strange little song, clear and sweet as a bird's in the dawn of spring.

The sound floated out on the moonlit silence, penetrated the closed door of her tyrant's home, and startled the old man as he leant over his scanty fare till he forgot food and place and all around, and rose and moved to the doorway to listen.

He could see no one but Già, glancing impatiently at his restless face, muttered:

"Psh! What do you seek there? It is only the child; she makes that noise often enough. I am sick of it. Come, shut the door and finish your supper. I'll stop her mouth quick enough when I've done mine."

"Stop her mouth! What do you mean? Do you know that she is a possession worth a hundredfold of your dancing tricks and *pas* and *pirouettes*? Are you a fool, Già, to shut

your ears to such a gift like that? Do you know what it may be to her in after years?"

"No; nor do I care!" retorted Già roughly. "What is it to me? I have my own plans for the girl, and she knows better than to thwart them!"

"But, Già," pleaded the old man earnestly, "think of the gain to yourself. If the child's feet can bring her hundreds, that voice will bring her thousands. Surely you are not fool enough to lose such a chance!"

"How mean you?" he asked curtly, but with a latent eagerness in voice and eyes that the musician noticed, and hastened to feed.

"I mean this. In the great cities a woman's voice is a fortune—to herself maybe—to those who own her for certain. A gift like this little dancer possesses will need but few years' training to perfect. Music is inborn in her. One could see it in the quickness with which she learnt my melodies and made them into song like that"—waving his hand in the direction of the door. "Well, where genius is, the way is clear and easy. Have her taught, educated, for the operatic stage; take her to any *impresario* you please, and for the rest of your life, friend Già, always supposing your claims on her person are the strongest, you may live like a prince at her cost."

The Italian's eyes glittered, and for a moment he maintained strict silence. Then he burst into a loud harsh laugh.

"Ah, you talk—you talk, friend Marco; but who is to know the worth of your opinion? You are so music mad yourself, you fancy you see a kindred spirit in every untutored beggar's brat upon your way. No, no. I cannot pay for training and teaching. I want my money's worth soon, and in a few years more she will get it me; but as for your system—why, I should need the gold of a prince first to place her where they teach singers."

"Not so. Let any great *maestro* hear her, and he will be of my opinion, I know, and for the mere speculation of the thing would advance what he is safe to be repaid hereafter. Such things are common enough in other lands besides this."

Già laughed.

"True enough. Many a beggar's brat has been lifted from the gutter and set the world ablaze with wonder at a voice. But the chance is too venturesome for me, Marco; neither do I choose to share with another the profit she may bring. No; let her be as she is."

The old musician sighed heavily and took his seat again at the rough table.

"Will you let me teach her?" he asked presently.

"A shout of laughter greeted the question.

"You! Why, Marco, are you dreaming? Were you ever a *maestro* yourself? Did you ever keep a lyrical aviary and cage wild birds for Art's sake, or—your own? Ha! ha! ha!"

The old withered face flushed, and Marco drew up his aged form with a sudden grace of dignity that silenced the man's rude mocking.

"You know nothing of my past," he said quietly. "I was not always what you have known me."

"I doubt it not. You have had your wild dreams and paid for them. And Art has served you well, Marco; for you have neither house, nor home, nor friends, nor wealth, and your years outnumber mine a full score."

The old man sighed.

"It is true," he said sadly. "Nevertheless, Già, I am her slave and follower still. But it needs not to discuss my affairs now. What I know I would teach willingly, if you are willing."

"And your recompence?"

"Nothing."

Già laughed aloud.

"With such views, friend Marco," he said presently, "I marvel not that your pockets are empty and your roof the sky. Did you always spend your labours on others, and starve your body to feed their souls? Of a surety you are wise!"

"What can it matter to *you*?" was the curt rejoinder. "I lived—I was happy. Can the greatest say more than that?"

"And what would you teach the child?" asked Già, after a moment's silence.

"I would train her voice—it is beautiful. I would teach her so well that were any accident to befall her limbs, or any circumstance oppose your views, she still might earn the gold you covet, and win the fame I have lost."

The simple words were uttered with a dignity so calm, an assurance so perfect, that the rough taunts of Già were for once silenced.

"Well, do as you will," he said roughly. "Only mind, I pay naught for this folly, and I keep her to my own ways still."

"May I tell her?"

"Send her in and bid her go to roost. The hour is late enough."

And with this ungracious permission he walked away into

the inner apartment of his dwelling-place and left Marco to seek the child if he wished.

The old man went out into the quiet moonlight and gazed about for the little songstress. Around him were woods and fields full of deep dreamy odours, while the vast expanse of country stretched on either side calm and still and fragrant as the night.

Seeing no sign of the child, he wandered on till he stood up to his knees in the dewy grasses and saw the radiance of the moon shining back from the surface of the water at his feet. Then, and then only, he paused, subdued and gladdened, too, by the beauty around, feeling in this hour some of the sweetness of freedom, the idleness and rest which his life had so little known.

As he stood he saw the child for whom he had been searching, standing a short distance off in the shadows of the trees. Her hands were clasped, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the splendour of the shining heavens, her senses lulled by the trancelike loveliness of earth and sky.

In some dim, imperfect way, that solemn loveliness, that mysterious beauty, that melancholy lustrous charm which wraps all southern nights as in a mantle of enchantment, stirred her young soul; and spoke to her with the language so many human ears are too deaf to hear.

She heard it. And the old man watching her heard it too, and they stood there apart, and yet drawn together by some mysterious sympathy which lay in the old world-worn heart of the one, and the struggling awakening soul of the other.

He came up to her after a time, and spoke very gently and quietly, as if fearful of disturbing the long unchildlike thoughts that held her so strangely still.

"You think it beautiful?" he asked her.

She started, and looked up at his face, but the kindly questioning eyes gave her courage.

"I do not know," she said simply; "I can only feel."

For the little mind was so sadly ignorant, and the little beating, breaking heart knew only its own loneliness, and felt only the truths of nature as something utterly apart from the cruelty of man!

"It is better to feel without knowing than to know without feeling," the old man answered her.

She looked at him silently with those great wonderful eyes that held such perfect trust in their soft depths.

"I always come out here when I can," she said gently; "but at night I love it best."

"You were singing just now, were you not?"

"Yes ; I cannot forget your music ; it comes whether I will or no."

"You love music too ?"

"Is *that* love ?"

She asked it so sadly and simply that the old man's eyes grew dim with pity for one so utterly friendless and ignorant.

"Yes," he said. "The feelings that you cannot describe, but which prompt your feet to obey and your voice to echo the melodies you hear, are born of some inward desire of which you are dimly conscious, just as you are conscious of the beauty of the night, the lulling calm of wind and water, the scents and breath of flowers. These feelings you have instinctively, and the feelings that give you a poet's nature may also give you an artist's genius."

She looked at him wonderingly, not comprehending his words, but following their meaning as a blind man might grope his way through a new and strange thoroughfare.

"You do not understand yet," said Marco, smiling kindly down at her bewildered face. "Some day you will know better what I mean. Should you like me to teach you to sing ?"

"Does it need teaching ? Are the birds taught ?"

"No ; but though it seems as natural to you to raise your voice in song as it is to them, yet your gift by culture and care might become a great and glorious one, might benefit your life hereafter and give you a happiness you little dream of now."

"Happiness ?" said the child dreamily, "what is that ? Lisa talks of it sometimes ; she says, when Già beats her, the saints will atone for it afterwards, and bring her to a place of happiness. Do you mean to take me there ?"

"You will go in God's good time, my child. I could not take you if I would. But happiness sometimes finds its way to earth—we need not always go to the saints above to find it."

"Astra and Léla say it is happiness not to be beaten, and to wear fine clothes like the children of the great nobles, and to have plenty to eat and drink. Is that so ?"

"For such minds as Astra's and Léla's, yes. For such minds as yours, maybe, no. Happiness is the one thing that every mortal on this earth is ever searching for ; if discovered, to lose."

"Have you found it ?"

"I ? No. It has come to me in dreams as it comes to most mortals, but it ever deserted my waking moments."

"Shall I find it ever, do you think ?"

"I know not," said the old man dreamily. "When God

made man He gave him every good gift of earth for his own use. He blessed him in mind and body. He gave him sense to appreciate the beauty that His bounteous hand has strewn broadcast over the face of the world ; but He withheld one thing, lest man should give no thought to Him, nor ever turn in prayer or gratitude to the Creator and Giver of all. And He said, ' When man has found love and desire, and possession and fame, and honour and wealth, and still in his heart is sad and in his soul unsatisfied, then shall he turn to Me in remembrance and in faith, for the one blessing I have withheld.' "

" And that is——? "

" Happiness. "

" It is not in the world, then ? "

" We think so sometimes ; there is a shadow of it ; a mirage that leads many to believe it real, but it fades at the moment we grasp it. It recedes farther and farther into the realms of the future, or mocks us from the background of a misused past. "

He spoke to himself more than to the child, but she tried to follow his meaning.

" Have you ever found it ? " she asked.

" I thought so—once. I am older now, and—wiser. "

" Does music make you happy ? When you played you did not look sad and stern as you do now. "

" Music is my one joy. I have lived for it, loved it, served it, and though poorly recompensed, my allegiance is unshaken still. "

" What will you teach me ? Will Già permit it ? "

" Assuredly yes. I gained his consent before telling you of my purpose. You do not want to grow to womanhood ignorant and uneducated, do you ? If I teach you music I may also teach you other things. Education is the best gift I could offer you, even were I as rich and famous as I am poor and forgotten. "

Her eyes kindled, her face flushed. She turned to him with a new light on her face and a new ring in her young sweet voice. .

" You are kind—very kind. I will do all you wish and tell me ; but you are sure it is Già's will ? "

" Sure, otherwise I had not told you what would raise false hopes in your breast, little one ! "

She drew a long deep breath, and stood silently there beside him, drinking in all the wonder of this new thought, which promised such marvellous changes in the dark, course, ignorant life she had led.

" I thank you, " she said softly, laying her hands in his

with a sweet and simple grace that was infinitely touching. “I should like to learn anything that would give me some hope of a life different to this.”

“And, God knows, I will do my best to give it you,” he said fervently. “And now, child, go within; the hour is late.”

The habit of obedience was too innate in her for either word or look of remonstrance. She merely touched the worn and aged hands she held lightly with her lips, and flitted away through the moonlit shadows, leaving him alone by the water's side.

“If I have done well or ill to-night, I know not,” he said softly to himself. “The good God will prove it in the time to come.”

And with slow and lagging steps he followed the child into the house, and lay down to rest on the rough sheepskins that Già had appointed as his couch for the night.

But Quità, in her little loft under the eaves, fell asleep and dreamed of all fair and gentle things such as her life had never known, while her little body ached with fatigue, and her closed eyes were wet with tears. But in sleep she had no sorrow and no fear, and strange and wonderful visions haunted the little brain that neither brutality, nor ignorance, nor hardship had been able to dull into acquiescence.

Across the darkness and misery of her life one single ray of hope had fallen—one single ray, that fate or circumstance might shape into a blaze of radiance, or darken with eternal gloom.



CHAPTER III

By humanity's hum at the root of the springs
And with reachings of Thought
We reach down to the deeps.—*E. B. Browning.*

PÈRE JEROME left the dining-room that night, to all outward appearances, as calm and unmoved as usual. He had exerted all his powers to entertain and charm the two young men, both of whom he so cordially detested in his heart; and then, when the long and stately meal was over, had withdrawn with a frank smile and a remark that they would doubtless prefer the charms of music to the garrulous chatter of an old man. But when he had passed into his own room, and there were no eyes to see or watch, a dark frown contracted his brows; the suave handsome face looked very evil.

Belonging to a church that masks the iron hand with a glove of velvet, that acknowledges no defeat, and breaks what it cannot bend, Father Jerome hated to confess, even to himself, that he was opposed, baffled, defied.

Ere he had come to Strathavon the mischief had begun.

While Cecil was yet a boy, the indifference with which he was treated by his father and brother had laid the seeds for the harvest of insubordination that had sprung up in later years. Left very much to himself, he had made the acquaintance of an old Protestant clergyman in a neighbouring parish—a gentle, homely, scholarly man, who, pleased with the boy's frank intelligence and quick appreciation, had taught and talked to him, and made religion appear so different a thing to the involved and tortuous doctrines of the Romish Church, the empty formula of prayers and penances, the fantastic symbolism of masses and festal celebrations, that Cecil's mind turned eagerly to such pure and simple doctrines—doctrines which paved the way for further research and more earnest investigation as years passed over his head, and doubts and speculations brought only disbelief and impatience in their train.

For long those feelings slumbered unknown and unsuspected by his own family, and when at last he declared himself in open revolt against their long-cherished opinions and avowed his dereliction from the faith of his family and race, it was too late for strong measures; and Père Jerome, who was then at Strathavon, had taken into his hands the mission of subjugating and reclaiming this erring son. A man of great learning and infinite tact, devoted to his order, ambitious and unscrupulous, gifted with courtly manners and all outward graces and fascinations, it had seemed to him that the task would be easy enough. But neither theological arguments, nor specious reasoning, nor all his knowledge of human nature and human minds, had yet enabled him to make one step on the way of his purpose. Cecil was too keen-sighted to be blinded by any subtlety of argument, too self-restrained to lose his temper at the irony or mockery that ridiculed his new opinions, too fearless to be intimidated, too indifferent to worldly advantages to be bribed.

Still, so long as he did not fully declare himself an adherent of another church, Père Jerome was far from despairing of ultimate success. He had so much subtle network to throw around the frank, careless, bold young life, so many instruments and agents to work out his schemes, that it seemed to him impossible but that success would come with time. He had only to work and wait. Yet to-night he was conscious of a furious irritation against Cecil and his friend, that

usurped all calm reasoning, and turned the patience of philosophy into the impulses of baffled passion.

To and fro he paced his room, his brain restless, his mind disturbed.

"It will be only a woman who can coerce him," he said at last. "The question is, how far to trust her?"

He threw himself down and relapsed into thought. Presently his brow cleared. He drew writing materials towards him, and carefully and slowly traced a few lines on paper. These he enclosed in an envelope, which he sealed and then re-enclosed in another directed to the head of a Romish seminary in Paris.

"I can see her handiwork already," he murmured complacently, as he laid the letter down and passed his hand over his brow. "He is abstracted and restless; his spirits are fitful; his dreams have a living embodiment that renders them tame and cold and spiritless; he is struggling against a fascination which alternately repels and attracts; the war between the passions of the heart and the desires of the soul is raging within his breast. For once he confides nothing to his friend. In that I see the first wedge of her influence. Either he is ashamed, or her power restrains him. Well, she has done us good service before now; surely she can be trusted to do this. She has proved herself remorseless and unscrupulous, caring neither for what she risks, nor what she costs. This would be a triumph indeed. But she must not know that she is used as a tool. Fortunately she is above the weaknesses of most women. She is cold and heartless, despite her beauty and her triumphs. Yes, the task must be hers. Let her give him the madness she has given to others; let her hold him sure and certain in that perilous bondage she can so well weave; and surely the rest should be easy. Those who love her, lose most of their wisdom whilst the trance lasts; ambition becomes worthless, life irksome, Art a weariness. Would she but act as I wish now, young Cecil would be ours, hand and foot, ere many months have passed; but for once she seems inactive. The idea of a woman with her power, her beauty, her fascinations, writing to me, 'I cannot keep him'! Well, she will be watched too. We cannot afford to lose so useful a tool."

"Billiards or music?" asked Lord Danvers laughingly; as the last ember of his cigar died out in the moonlit terrace, and he and Cecil paused in their regular pacing up and down.

"Whichever you please," said his friend. "Last night it was billiards."

"As much as to say to-night let it be music. You make a good listener, Cis; but I fear I bore you sometimes."

"Are you fishing for compliments? You must know pretty well by this time that you can never do that. Talking of 'boring,' Vere, don't stand on ceremony a moment when you are weary of Strathavon. There are the glories of the season awaiting you in town; it is really awfully good of you to put up with this dull life."

"I thought we were above talking such nonsense, Cis. Dull! Didn't I tell you I wanted a rest after knocking about so long? Besides, I have all my speeches to think of for the forthcoming election. You have no idea what noble orations I have composed in the solitude of these woods."

Cecil smiled slightly.

"It seems a good joke to think of you among those benches of solemnities," he said.

"Say rather that arena of conquests," exclaimed Lord Danvers, "where one can fight one's way upward single-handed to success, and feel proud of one's triumph. That is a different matter to stepping into a party and walking along the road of ready-paved opinions."

"I never have troubled my head about politics," said Cecil carelessly; "and I never shall now. It seems to me that patriotism is but a cloak for one of two passions: vanity or ambition. Party prejudices outweigh so often all purer motives; craft conceals the designs of selfishness, and oratory veils the basest motives with a brilliance that sweeps away sober judgment."

"Do you deny that great statesmen have not been also true patriots?"

"Deny it? No! But to the generality of politicians the best possible good for the country whose honour is in their keeping, seems but a secondary consideration to their own ambition, their passion for office, or the peculiar idiosyncrasy of their own views."

"That is a sweeping accusation, the result more of prejudice than thought," said Lord Danvers good-humouredly. "Of course the bias of one mind may materially affect others, if that one is stronger, loftier, and more adapted to rule. False positions and errors have disgraced all governments at some period or another, and at a crisis of importance the fate of a country has not unfrequently hung on the lips of one man. But at such times I think all lower passions and ambitions have given way to the intense desire to be true to what is right and just, to maintain with honour all the responsibilities of national glory. The true patriot cannot be lowered by failure or ennobled by rewards. He acts and

speaks disinterestedly, and is great in the true sense of that word."

"I have not denied it: I merely say he is rarely found. But if we are to stand here and argue I shall have no music, and I prefer that to all questions of party and policy."

"Have you neither yourself?"

"No; you know that. An heroic sovereignty, a soiless fame, an unimpeachable integrity, a stainless honour—what party can show you these?"

"You ask too much of life, or rather of human nature, Cecil. Dissatisfaction lies at the root of all things. To those who 'strive towards the light,' yet never reach it, there can, indeed, be no enjoyment that brings forgetfulness, no goal which promises content. Well, let us see what music can do to charm away our gravity, or rather gloom, for you look as if the latter were your portion, though it is ungrateful of you to blame fate yet. There have been few thorns among your roses, I should say."

Leaning against the sill of the open window, with the scents of the summer night moving on the air, and the massive solemn harmonies of a cathedral chant filling all the room with sound, Cecil gave himself up to such supreme enjoyment of the moment, and the meditative charm that filled it, as only a nature gifted, sensitive, and intellectual can give itself up. *

Many scenes and memories thronged to his brain as these solemn mystical notes rolled out in measured rhythm. He thought of his lonely boyhood, his dreams, and studies, and pursuits, his early youth, when first those conflicts between reason and superstition had shaken his soul to the very dust and laid in ruins the temple of a bigoted faith.

Cecil Calverley's nature was one which could never be blinded by enthusiasm, however much affected by it for the time. No doctrine could quite satisfy him unless some theory of his own mind reconciled it to reason, or united it to those higher and loftier conceptions of what is pure and perfect, which all intelligence that is well trained, or naturally gifted, essentially craves.

That very artistic and enthusiastic part of his nature which might have seemed to threaten him with danger, had been kept in bounds by a desire for research, a bias towards sound philosophy which early training and his own ardent love of learning had fostered. With a little more of the enthusiasm, a less perfect physical organisation, the ardent and imaginative portion would have ruled the reasoning and didactic. But youth, and health, and vigorous intellect combated the weaker element, and Cecil, who might have

been a devotee of the very Church he renounced, suddenly threw aside its trammels and put himself beyond the pale of its membership.

His intellect could never reconcile itself to that complete submission, that narrow subordination which springs from priestly control. Freedom of thought was to him as vital a necessity as freedom of body. A creed or doctrine which appealed to mere credulity and based itself on human authority he could only despise, and the Divine behests as to priestly jurisdiction, he declared limited to certain restraints which Rome had long overstepped. Confession, which gives such terrible power to those who extort and enforce it, was to him a stumbling-block which no argument could overcome, and he had to combat that in its most subtle and eloquent forms from the lips of Père Jerome. But the force of superstition, being once broken by education and intelligence, could never again reassert itself. He could not but see much that was grotesque, much that was faulty, much that was impious in the Church he had abandoned. It might be a Church to reward ambition, to foster tyranny, to encourage superstition, to bribe service, to give to unscrupulous minds and powerful intellects that most dangerous gift of sovereignty over weaker minds, control over lower intellects, which misuses its own power only too often, and despises even what it rules ; but was it a Church to beautify religion with the purity of a perfect priesthood, to adore the Godhead it professed to serve, with the creature's reverence, not the equal's effrontery ? There lay the foundation-stone of error, the groundwork of a fabric of disbelief, and thereon stood that structure of mingled doubt and resistance which in Cecil Calverley's mind had replaced the tenets of all creeds and doctrines.

These thoughts and memories swept through his mind now as the music rose and swelled through the quiet room, the music of a "Messe Solennelle" that brought back the recollection of swaying censers, and gorgeous pageantry, and all the festal magnificence of cathedral worship, yet with that memory brought also the old pain and restlessness of a shaken faith, of awakened doubts.

"Why did you play that ?" he asked abruptly, as the music ceased at last and his friend came over to his side. "I wanted to be soothed after our priestly controversy at dinner. That music has had just the contrary effect."

"It was just that controversy which put it into my head," said Lord Danvers, leaning out over the broad window-sill and drinking in the soft breath of the summer night with a sigh of enjoyment. "Such music suits a night like this," he

went on. "It is a hymn of its own praise—a thanksgiving of its own beauty. If the Church you have deserted has nothing else to be thankful for, at least it has inspired some of the grandest music that master-minds have been able to create. I sometimes think in those far-off ages that life was more real, and religion more a part of men's existence, that there was some truth in their professions—that in the Church or the monastery, the world or the retreat, a greater zeal prevailed than does now. Men seem ashamed of their Christianity in these days; they were proud of it then. Of course there were errors, and imperfections, and conceits, but even they had their origin in some grain of a faith nobly conceived—a truth conscientiously felt. It was only when overlaid with men's doctrines and conceits that the faith and the truth fell from their original purity, and were so hidden and cloaked by false disguises, that scarcely a vestige of the original element remained."

"It is the craving of ambition—the incessant striving after power that has so deteriorated the priesthood of all denominations. This craving seems to mingle even with the zeal of fanatics."

"And why?" asked Lord Danvers. "Simply because of the awfully insidious tempting of that power, which all authority and control over the minds of others possesses. Exercised in different ways—by different degrees—yet the mainspring is the same in all sects. The Jesuits and Romanists maintain it simply by obtaining a secret influence over the minds of individuals—by pandering to vice, which they use as a scourge, by encouraging feelings and passions which subordinate the mind to the body, the soul to the will. If Protestantism is a purer doctrine, yet that craving for superiority is gradually creeping into its apparent simplicity. Hence the Ritualistic tendencies of the day—the desire for superiority, not only over the masses who form a congregation, but the 'inferior' orders of the clerical body. Why inferior? I often ask. Bishop, rector, vicar, curate, serving professedly one great Master, preaching humility, bidding all men despise pomp and show and worldly vanities, where do we find them exemplifying their own doctrines? No greater sticklers for social position and place exist."

"I fear our experience has been an unfortunate one," said Cecil thoughtfully. "I suppose there is bad as well as good in all professions, even that which should be greatest and loftiest, and to which single-heartedness of life and purity of soul alone should be incentives to adopting. As long as benefices and preferments and utility form motives sufficient for entering the Church of England, we must look out for lip-

service, and expect a wide margin allowed between precept preached, and precept practised. After all, how happily constituted are those individuals who accept everything without question, and to whom belief is a mere-matter of—constitution.”

“A class to which we could never belong, though,” laughed Lord Danvers. “Reason may be a dangerous gift, but never a useless one. In most minds, though, I think there is an element of materialism which is the hardest opponent faith has to combat—a something which asks proof or satisfaction ere giving in to the tenets of any doctrine. Doubts are hard things to combat, and spring up hydra-headed in congenial soil. The accident of birth is too often the sole thing responsible for any creed or form of faith. What we are taught, what our parents and ancestors have believed is, in too many cases, the sole groundwork of a life’s religion. To think, to argue, to investigate, is a task needing both courage and intelligence, and one also that too often shakes a preconceived faith to its very foundation. Why trouble to do this? It is often the question we ask, seldom the question we answer—the origin of doubts few have strength to investigate; for all men are not alike, and creeds and opinions are not unfrequently the result of chance, of some special enthusiasm or peculiarity of temperament.”

“Human nature is a mystery,” said Cecil with a sigh.

“Ay, and a mystery to which there is no individual key. We do not even understand ourselves; how, then, can we understand each other? Ah, Cecil, ere you have reached my years, or gained half my experience, you, too, may have learnt that in human life there is so much that is pathetic, yet so much that is vile—so much that is sublime, yet so much that is weak, that nothing short of an Infinite Pity can judge of its imperfections—nothing but an Infinite Love can pardon its manifold errors!”

CHAPTER IV

This bitter love is sorrow in all lands,
Draining of eyelids—wringing of drenched hands.
Laus Veneris.

With the next morning’s post came news that broke up the little party at Strathavon.

Père Jerome announced his intention of going to London, and Lord Danvers received an intimation from his father, to the effect that the sudden death of Sir Forbes Waylord,

member for the berough of Weyborne, left the place at the Marquis's disposal, and he had lost no time in nominating his son. There would be little or no opposition, but Lord Danvers must come home immediately, as no time was to be lost.

The news delighted the young man. Cecil thought he had not seen him look so exultant and interested for many a day as he looked on the receipt of this letter. Political life had always possessed a strange fascination for him, and now the long-looked-for chance was thrown at his feet.

By noon that day Cecil found himself alone at Strathavon. By night he had grown so restless that he felt solitude almost unbearable. All his usual occupations seemed to have lost their charm. His painting was untouched; books could not enchain his wandering thoughts; the glow and colour of the summer-time were all about him; turn where he would, there were beauty, and fragrance, and peace; but the charm of Nature must be in accord with our own hearts, ere her loveliness can woo us to perfect delight or entire forgetfulness of our own troubles.

Now an oppression weighed him down; solitude, though sweet in one sense, was painful in another. His thoughts turned ever to the woman who had enthralled him, and he longed, yet dreaded, to see her again. Days passed on. His father was still confined to his own room, and, in answer to Cecil's dutiful messages, sent word that he was not well enough to receive him. The time that had been wont to pass all too rapidly, now seemed to drag itself wearily and slowly by.

While in this unenviable frame of mind he received one morning a tiny perfumed note—a note as innocent-looking as the one which had first forged those fetters that held him, and the very sight of which turned his brain giddy with the sudden rapture of joy. Yet its contents were brief and simple enough.

"I write to tell you," she said, "that a letter from Gaspard Ducroix informs me he has gone to America, and taken the children with him. Will you acquaint Lord Danvers with the news? I am leaving Paris myself shortly, as my engagement is over, and I am longing for country air."

That was all, save the usual courtesies in conclusion, and Cecil's heart sank as he read it. No desire expressed to see him again; no hint of future meeting; not even a word to say where she was going. He blamed himself now that he had not returned to Paris immediately Lord Danvers had left Strathavon. At least he might have seen her—once. Now months might pass ere she would return, and he should know nothing. All that day he spent in roaming the wood

in a fever of unrest. He read the note again and again, but could derive no comfort from it. At evening, wearied and worn out, he returned to the Castle, and learnt that Père Jerome had just returned.

The news in no way increased his good-humour. He hated to think of the long *tête-à-tête* meal before him, the scrutiny of those calm cold eyes, the necessity to guard his looks and words lest the priest should read the signs of inward disturbance.

Little did he suspect that his secret was already known, that its springs were moved by his enemy's hand !

Whether by accident or design, Père Jerome, after dwelling lightly on his visit to London, turned the conversation to Paris. Then he spoke of Cecil's recent visit, complimented him on his bravery in that episode of the fire, and alluded slightly to that celebrated actress whose life he had saved. It was all so naturally and skilfully done that Cecil suspected no ulterior motive. The bare fact of being able to speak of the woman who filled his every thought was in itself a delight, and, masking all eagerness, and appearing to all outward extent as cool and self-possessed as Père Jerome himself, he listened, and agreed, and discussed Mdlle. D'Egmont and her talents and popularity just as the priest had intended he should.

"Capricious, like all her charming sex," Père Jerome murmured over his wine. "Ah, I forgot, Mr. Cecil, you consider none of them charming as yet. Well, better that than find too many of them so, as Lord Malden has a knack of doing. By the way, I hope you intend to be here for the shooting season. There are to be gay doings, and a large party are invited."

"I cannot say," answered Cecil evasively. "I am no sportsman, as you know, and gaieties are not much in my line."

"True," said the priest thoughtfully. "I suppose you have missed your friend this last week. He is busy canvassing, I hear. I should say there was no doubt of his being elected."

"None whatever ; there is no other candidate," laughed Cecil.

"He will do well. I fancy he is clever, thoughtful, and far-seeing," remarked the priest. "Not that talent seems a *sine quâ non* in the House. But your friend evidently means work, and will work well."

"I don't doubt that. For my part, I fail to see much attraction in the career he has chosen ; but he seems content enough."

After a little more discussion on the subject, Père Jerome

left the room. Cecil pushed aside his half-emptied glass and walked over to the window. As he stood there his eye fell on a French newspaper thrown carelessly on a stand near by. He took it up and glanced over its contents without much interest; but suddenly his eye rested on a paragraph which arrested his indifference and changed it to eagerness. The few lines informed the world of Paris that the famous actress, Mdlle. Thé d'Egmont, was about to leave town for her villa at Deauville.

Cecil read them over and over again, and as he read his heart began to beat more quickly; its vague restlessness and longing seemed to urge him on to a more settled purpose.

He tossed the paper aside, and went out on the deserted terrace and paced up and down with restless feet, while two cold stern eyes watched him from the library window, and read the meaning of those uneasy movements, and smiled, well satisfied as they so read.

"He will go to her," the priest said below his breath. "And *this* time she can surely keep him."

He was right.

The next day's noon found Cecil on his way to France once more, ashamed and yet unable to resist the impulse that drew him thither.

Faustine had a charming little villa at Deauville. People wondered that she should have preferred that quiet little retreat to its more brilliant and garish neighbour Trouville, and some shook their heads and whispered that doubtless she had good reasons; but if she had told them the true motives of her choice, they would not have believed her, and she knew that, and therefore troubled herself little about what they chose to say.

"A woman, who lives in any light of publicity must expect to be talked about," she would declare to some select circle of friends, who of course repeated her words to other circles, till, like the widening rings made by the dropping of a pebble in a pool, her own words spread and were magnified and widened in their meaning, until the innocent little pebble of her confession would scarcely have recognised its own work.

Of a truth, Faustine cared very little for the circles, or the gossip. She was too careless—too defiant. She loved the freedom of her life; and the fact that that life was bound by social prejudices, and subject for every variety of scandal, only afforded her amusement.

"Let them say what they please," she would declare

defiantly. "I know what I am. Does it matter if they choose to think me something different?"

It had not mattered for long. But the day was coming when it would.

No woman can afford to set the world at defiance always. She may do it for years—for half her life, perhaps, and laugh still; but, when the day comes that that world holds for her a life whose interest she craves—a heart whose love she covets—then will her error live before her eyes, and the laugh will die off her lips, and indifference will no longer be possible.

Faustine knew what the world said of her. She knew also she had given it plenty of cause to say even worse than it did. She had had a purpose to fulfil, and had chosen her own way of fulfilling it. Every wasted passion she had scorned, every new frenzy she had fanned to fever-heat, every heart she had rejected, every intrigue she had foiled, were to her but means to an end. "They are but beasts of prey," she said scornfully. "Let them for once be balked and suffer. To harm them—it is hardly possible. The world has a pretty fable about women, who are the evil geniuses of men—who ruin them body and soul. Pshaw! No man living need be so ruined, did he not himself desire it. It is they, who, with all their boasted strength and superiority of reason, hesitate at neither art, nor persuasion, nor deceit to destroy what is weaker and more helpless than themselves. For one woman who has done harm to men, how many hundreds of men have done harm to women? For one of us who tempts, how many hundreds are tempted! Where is a man's mercy or pity for the creature who loves and trusts him? Where is the vaunted strength of mind and principle that places us at their feet in all questions of superiority? Can we believe in it? We see their lowest passions are their rulers, and for the fairness of a face—the mere possession of the craze of a moment—they fling away youth, honour, wealth, fame, as valueless. If they be worth love, they should also be worth reverence. I have found them but fools of passion. As fools I treat them. Harm! Let them cease to exercise it themselves, ere stooping to accuse women."

Yet she was not quite true to herself when she spoke thus. With all her coldness, and bitterness, and contempt had mingled at times a strange compassion for some young life flung rudderless on a sea of passion—its future at her mercy, its present fettered by her influence. The fatal gifts of her own beauty and fascination had sometimes looked hateful in her sight, and the anguish, and misery, and despair she had evoked echoed in some way across the stillness of her solitude

—the thoughts of some softer moments. But never yet had such pity stirred, such regret moved her as now, when against her own will she was forced to act her old part of enchantress, to fetter both body and soul of one man who in some way stood apart from the world of others she had known—the memories of others she had ruined.

Away from the whirl of her life in Paris, with only a few friends, and those real and tried ones, around her, in the simplicity and quietude of her villa retreat, she was seen at her best—seen as the world never saw her, never believed she could be seen.

After all the stir, and glitter, and babble that were always about her life in Paris, the contrast of these quiet hours by sea and wood, these lazy driftings over the blue waters in the haze of hot sunshine, or glamour of moonlight, were doubly delicious.

Deauville itself is not beautiful, and quiet and dull enough to all appearance, but she liked it, and revelled in the quietude, the sunshine, the liberty of hours and days, the fresh salt breath of the waters, the sights of fairylike yachts, and fishing craft, and pleasure-boats, the flight of silver-winged gulls, the brown rocks and cool little shallows where one might wade unseen, all the sights and sounds that only some such quiet unfashionable little retreat could give.

One morning she had left her grounds and gone down to the seashore. It was very early—so early that no one in her villa was stirring, and the morning mists were scarce cleared from the sea. The cool yellow sands were quite deserted, the sky was rose and amber tinted with the glory of the new-risen sun.

She wandered on and on, her simple linen dress blown to and fro, her face softly coloured by the breath of the fresh seabreeze. She had never looked more lovely in the elegances of her Parisian toilettes, never half so fair when she had dazzled wealth and fashion, as she moved across her stage of many triumphs.

Standing there in the flood of sunlight, her eyes resting dreamily on the dazzling waters where the white sails and the white waves blended together, she heard a footstep on the firm hard sands behind her, and glancing up impatient of this sudden disturbance to both the thoughts and the solitude found herself face to face with—Cecil Calverley!

The meeting was thoroughly unexpected by both. The start on either side was genuine in its surprise and also its gladness. There was no time for feeling to mask itself under conventionality; over the young frank face of Cecil the blood rushed hotly, from hers all vestige of colour faded to return

in one burning wave that betrayed an emotion deeper than mere surprise, sweeter than mere welcome. But she was too well accustomed to conceal feeling to be long embarrassed. She gave him her hand as frankly as ever, and listened with perfect self-possession to his somewhat incoherent explanation of how and why he had come to Deauville. A few moments more found them both wandering over the quiet sands side by side, saying but little, yet with an unutterable gladness in each heart that speech could never have exceeded.

"How lovely she is ! How could I ever have left her ?" thought Cecil, gazing with passionate adoration at the beautiful face with its downcast eyes, and mobile exquisite lips.

"He has returned, he has not forgotten," was the thought that stirred the woman's heart with the sweetest triumph it had ever known, and for the first time left behind that triumph a thrill of pain, a passion of regret.

For awhile their conversation dwelt only on generalities. Anything like personal topics was avoided ; but when two hearts are full of each other it is a difficult matter to keep up a pretence of indifference.

Gradually Cecil spoke out something of the blank these weeks of absence had been ; and though she listened calmly enough and turned off his words with light jests and playful disbelief, as she knew only too well how to do, her heart throbbed quicker, her mission was almost forgotten, for once she herself felt interest in the game she had played so often, and yet that very interest prompted her to speak both coldly and cruelly, to affect incredulity when faith was all too sure, to guard for his own sake whatever she would have most desired to wound.

That he loved her, in a way, she knew well enough now. That that love was fighting against the very distrust she wantonly sowed, she knew also. He would have believed in her had she let him ; he did believe, despite herself, and yet with all the joy that that thought gave to her heart, mingled also a pain she had never known. Only when those young frank eyes looked at her with such passionate entreaty, such silent worship, did she feel keen shame for all the baseness, and folly, and errors of her past ; only then did she long for waters of forgetfulness to wash away their memory, to make her once more worth the pure and impassioned love that asked nothing save its own return and her belief. How could she give one or other now ?

With the golden light quivering all about them, with the sound of the waves breaking softly against the strand, with the solitude and hush of the early day, what untold nameless ecstasy this hour seemed to hold !

In both their hearts its memory sank to rest, to live again in dreams of all that is wild, blissful, impossible. In both their lives would its magic linger, through all the years that were yet un-lived. The memory of a love whose dawn was opening in glory to pass through storm and sorrow, tumult and pain ; on, still on, to a night of darkness, whose shadows now seemed far enough away.

CHAPTER V

I am come unto thee
To do thee service, O love ;
Yet cannot I see
Thou wilt take any pity thereof,
And mercy on me !

"Come and dine with me to-night," said Faustine, as Cecil left her at her villa gates that morning. "I have a few friends staying with me. It will be very quiet. I can offer you some good music, that is all."

"Do you need offer anything save the thought of your presence, madame?" said Cecil low and earnestly, as he released the hand she had extended.

"A conventional compliment, and one that turns my own words upon me," she said, laughing. "Well, come if you wish. You said you were alone here."

"I shall be only too happy," he said, with such a ring of delight in his voice that she could not but see how thoroughly his words were meant. "I am alone, as you say. It is more than kind of you to take compassion on me."

Then he left her, marvelling how he should get rid of the long hours of the day—ready almost to hate the sunlight that was so new to that day, because it foretold so many weary moments to be passed, and he could have welcomed the darkness of night with such eager rapture, knowing it would bring him to *her* presence.

It is hard to say whether a feeling fought against, reasoned against, does not take deeper root than one yielded to without a struggle. Cecil had known his folly, his madness, only too well, and yet, despite all efforts to conquer them, he felt they were beyond his power to control, or to forego. With the first sight of Faustine's face, the first sound of the well-remembered voice, all his scruples had utterly vanished. The old sorcery returned with tenfold power, and he had now neither will nor desire to oppose it. With her he forgot all save the charm of the present hour. He could hope nothing,

expect nothing. Beyond the immediate moment he dared not look ; but that moment was too sweet, too entrancing, for aught to shadow its brightness, or whisper of its far too brief existence.

She left his presence and went up through her sunny gardens and into the pretty bijou house, and over her there fell the darkness of a great regret. It was too late to alter anything now. He had come to her of his own free will, and whether his passion died in silence or burst into spoken reproach she was at least blameless in this instance. She had even withstood the counsel that had bidden her summon him to her presence. Not by word or sign had she betrayed any wish to call him back—yet he was here. That simple fact told its own tale.

“I am sorry,” she said with a sigh, as she stood in her own boudoir and looked over the shining waters with wistful and heedless eyes. “He is too loyal, too chivalrous to be served as the others were served : and, as for winning him to the faith he has abjured, well, even *that* end seems scarcely worth such means as I must employ. I wish the task lay in other hands. Yet even I, who boast of freedom, am a slave. There is one who says to me, ‘Obey !’ Alas ! I have no choice, and for once I regret that I have none.”

There was upon her face a warmth, in her eyes a look that had never rested there before. In the fulness of her pity lurked also a tenderness hitherto unknown. In the game she was about to play, the old cunning and coolness seemed to have deserted her. Friends and foes alike credited her nature with no depths of tenderness, but such depths there were, and the tears that filled her eyes now and shut out the brilliance of sea and sky were the outspring of as genuine an emotion as ever visited a woman’s heart. For the first time in her life some shadow of the suffering she dealt fell across herself, and pride, and coldness, and evil intent died out in the vain utterance of a passionate regret.

“If only it were not too late !”

The day dragged its weary length, and evening came at last.

As Cécil hurried to Le Caprice, as Faustine had named her villa, he thought with a sudden pang of the peace of mind and freedom that had once been his—of how, but a brief while before, he would have laughed in the face of anyone who had told him that such folly as this could bind and enslave him. When he was announced, he found Faustine surrounded by a group of men and women. As she greeted him there was nothing but indifference and perfect ease in

her look and words. She introduced him to her other guests, and then, with an impatient glance at the clock, murmured something about a late arrival.

The words had hardly left her lips when the door of the *salon* was thrown open, and, to Cecil's amazement, there stepped forward his Parisian acquaintance, the Count de Besançon! He could not repress an involuntary start; then a feeling of mingled impatience and dislike swept over him as he noted the Count's manner to Faustine. Too well bred to betray any surprise, the Count de Besançon greeted Cecil as he did any of the other guests, and ere many words had been exchanged dinner was announced.

With a slight bend of her head the hostess signified to Cecil that he was to be her escort, but whatever satisfaction the young man might have derived from that honour was spoilt by the obnoxious Count's having secured a place at her other hand. A man in love is never at his best, and Cecil was conscious of being unusually silent and oppressed. The Count, on the other hand, was both brilliant and witty—the life and soul of the party. Yet there was something in his manner to Faustine that made the young man's blood boil with indignation, though it gave no tangible cause for offence—nothing but that nameless graceful familiarity which seemed to hint at something more than the acquaintanceship of the hour, and which she appeared neither to notice, nor resent.

For once in his life Cecil drank deeply and feverishly. Yet the sparkling wines brought no coolness to his veins, no forgetfulness to his brain. Faustine at last noticed something of his recklessness, and over her face came a sudden shadow. The dinner was perfect in its way, and perfectly served, but Cecil touched scarcely anything, and spoke very seldom. He was thankful when the meal was over and the men rose to rejoin the ladies. The Count de Besançon had expressed some surprise at the young man's presence here, and Cecil had answered coldly that he was staying at Deauville, and having accidentally met Mdlle. D'Egmont, had accepted her invitation to dinner. He was quite aware, as he gave the explanation, that it was not believed for a single moment, and the fact did not improve his temper, or mitigate his growing dislike for this man.

There are some people to whom we feel unreasonably antagonistic from first acquaintance, just as there are some to whom we are as irresistibly attracted. In neither case can we explain to ourselves the reason for such feelings, though we may rest assured that both the prejudice and the attraction are not destined to end there.

That colourless face, both handsome and sensual; those

dark, cold, watchful eyes that nothing escaped ; the irony and wit, the polished grace of a courtier mingled with the coolness and self-possession of a man of the world—all these, which placed Cecil Calverley at an immeasurable disadvantage, yet could not conceal from him the fact of the rivalry between himself and the Count. To them both this woman was the object of an intense and uncontrollable passion, and though she knew it perfectly well, the supreme unconsciousness of her manner gave no evidence of the fact. Only once or twice, as the polished sarcasms of the elder man were answered by the fiery and impetuous rejoinders of the younger, did a terrible fear cross her ; the blood grew like ice in her veins.

Swords had been crossed and lives sacrificed for her before now, and she had but laughed at the folly ; but in this hour she felt sick at heart as she thought of such antagonism, and used all her efforts to keep these two apart.

Music sounded through the pretty rooms, women's light laughter rang out in all vivacity and *abandon*, the windows were open to the night, and the sea lay like a silver mirror in the distance. The scene and the hour were fair enough to have enchanted Cecil's artistic fancies, but now they only brought with them a vehement pain. It seemed to him that he was nothing more to her than any other in this idle crowd—that all memory of that morning had passed from her mind. Farther and farther his ideal seemed to fly as he listened to raillery, and epigram, and *équivoque*, that to his mind were unsuited to the presence of women, and at which she only laughed, without rebuking their freedom.

The soft hues of her dress, the gleam of her flashing jewels, the loveliness that dazzled all men's eyes and drew them round her wherever she moved, all these but added to his sufferings and heightened the tumult in his veins. He had saved her life, and yet was he anything more than one of these idlers in her sight?

Impatient and resentful, he moved away from the crowd, and went out on to the little gilded balcony overlooking the gardens. His head throbbed dizzily, the brilliance and beauty of the night seemed to swim before him like a mist.

He heard the song of a nightingale among the roses, and the far-off swell of the sea as the waves rolled up in monotonous succession, but the song and the sound seemed far off and indistinct. Suddenly in the room beyond fell a hush of silence and expectation, and through the open windows swept to him the mournful impassioned music of the lovely voice he had first heard that fatal evening in the spring.

He could not tell what she sang, save that it was a French poem wedded to a sad and tender melody, and that the exquisite voice breathed out its passionate longings and its mournful refrain with a pathos that moved him almost to tears.

He could see her seated at the piano, her eyes bent down on the keys, the soft light playing on her bright hair and flashing jewels, her face no longer arch, mutinous, bewildering, but pale and sad, and with a depth of earnestness in its changed expression that once again awoke in him the old chivalrous pity, the old knightly faith.

Amidst the murmurs of applause, the enthusiastic praises that followed, he alone was silent. She had stirred some deeper thoughts to life within his breast than any words of praise could utter. Her eyes fell on the motionless figure beyond the open window, and moving away from the crowd around her, she passed through the room, and drawing aside the lace hangings, stepped out on to the balcony by his side.

"You are not ill?" she asked anxiously, as she saw how white his face was, how burning his eyes.

"My head aches," he answered, somewhat apologetically. "I thought the fresh air would do me good."

She looked away from the haggard young face, and again that thrill of mingled pain and pity stirred her heart.

They stood there silent for some moments. The night was very still; the stars were shining in myriads above the dark trees and over the quiet waters. Amidst the odours of the roses thrilled the song of the nightingale. Words—fiery, impulsive, born of the magic of the hour, the sorcery of her presence—rushed to Cecil Calverley's lips, but suddenly she leant towards him and stayed their utterance.

"You do not like the Count de Besançon," she said low and hurriedly. "I was not aware you were acquainted with him."

"He is a friend of Lord Danvers," answered Cecil, steadying his voice by an effort, driving back in their channels those wild longings that had almost broken into speech. "You are right, madame; I do not like him."

"You are very frank," she said. "Well, I do not wonder at your prejudice. There is little in common between you. He is staying at Trouville. You will not meet often."

"Is he a friend of yours?" inquired Cecil hastily.

"Hardly a friend, monsieur; I give that title to few of the many people I know."

"He is a married man, is he not?"

"He *was*. His wife died some two or three months ago."

"And he consoles himself at Trouville. How admirable!"

Faustine laughed slightly. "Men are inconstant ever," she said. "To life as to death. But he made no pretence of mourning. He and his wife had not lived together for years. They were a very ill-assorted couple."

"We are envying the moonlight, madame," said a voice beside them, "since it has robbed us of your presence."

"Ah, Count!" said Faustine, turning laughingly towards him, "you may well do that. What society can give us the tranquil charm, the tender memories, the beauty, and magic, and delight of a night like this?"

"That no society could offer such charms to you I can well believe, madame," answered the Count de Besançon. "But, alas! your presence outrivals the night for us."

"More flattery. You should keep that for the drawing-room, Count. You are the antithesis of repose yourself, and have spoilt my poetry by turning it to practical account. I was forgetting my guests. Mr. Calverley, since your head is so bad, I will not expect you to forsake solitude and coolness. Pray stay here as long as you please, and I will send you some strong coffee."

Cecil bowed in answer, but his brow contracted as he saw her take his rival's arm and pass up the long room by his side. "I was a fool to come here," he muttered under his breath.

The nightingale sang on among the roses, and the slow soft waves rolled back from shore to sea, but to the young passionate heart, beating out its own misery in vain wishes, and torturing itself with vainer hopes, the magic and music of the night had vanished. For when love has laid its spells upon a human life, the melody of one voice and the magic of one face are all it can hear or see; and it moves through the world deaf, and blind, and heedless to all else, and conscious of no other presence.

"I was happy till I loved her," Cecil murmured despairingly.

But yet he knew in his own heart that he had not been so; that he would rather suffer these miseries of longing and unrest than have kept that serene unconsciousness. For even if love be cruel, there are lessons it can teach that give to life a fulness and beauty no other teaching can bestow. Words cannot paint, and all the telling in the world cannot make an untouched heart comprehend what it lacks. It were as vain to describe the wonders of the ocean to the child who has never seen the sea, as to preach of the mysteries and emotions and follies of passion to an unawakened soul.

The difference between the consciousness and unconsciousness of love, is just the difference that lies between all the gloom and all the glory of life.

That is all.

Not much, perhaps the cynic will say. No, not much ; but enough to rob speech of half its language, day of half its sun, earth of its most perfect joy, heaven of its one most glorious hope.

CHAPTER VI

"I LOVE YOU"

Love wounds as we grasp it,
And blackens and burns as a flame.

THAT night, when her guests had all departed, Faustine sat for long in gloomy thought. Then she went to her *escritoire* and took from thence some letters and read them over slowly and carefully.

"There seems no other motive," she murmured; "there are no political intrigues in this case. 'The true faith,' he says. Ah, Heaven help us! What faith is true—what creed is best to follow? I feel weary sometimes of endless rituals, and pompous forms. Where, in them all, is rest or peace to be found?"

She sighed wearily, and then thrust her papers away and locked the *escritoire*. "A matter of importance—I fail to see it," she said aloud. "But I must obey. Would he do *that* for my sake, I wonder? could I indeed influence him?"

A smile sweet and tender curved her lips; all the grace and womanliness returned to her face; a colour like a rose's hue glowed in her cheeks; her great dark eyes shone with softest light.

She looked her loveliest at that moment, though she was all unconscious of the fact.

"Young, ardent, imaginative. Yes, he is all these," she mused, repeating the words of her instructions. "Little regard for women—totally uncompromised by any hitherto. No one at hand to influence him." Yes, he should be easy to conquer. Only for once, the *will* is wanting. But I dare not confess that to Père Jerome. Ah me! with all my boasted freedom I am but a poor slave. I feel the fetters beneath the purple only too often. This is the life of sovereignty he promised me! This—that places honour, conscience, pity, at his feet; that bids me do his bidding, and holds me at his mercy, and winds so many chains about my life that no sword

can cut them asunder! And I believed in his promises once, and in him. Oh fool, fool! better a thousand times to have buried myself in endless seclusion, as I so longed to do, than have listened to his persuasions and served him as a bond slave for all these weary years."

Then she passed from the room and went to seek the rest she sorely needed, and for that night at least so longed to find.

For eight days Cecil lingered on at Deauville, and each day brought him to her presence. Her guests had left, all save Madame Bontoux. He was her only companion in walks and wanderings by sea and shore; he rowed her over the blue waters and listened to her voice in the summer evenings as she sang to him and for him alone. They sauntered through the villa grounds in the radiance of moonlight, when the nightingales sang among the roses, and their own hearts thrilled to the echo of their songs. No one intruded on that delicious solitude; no movement of the outer world seemed to threaten disturbance of those enchanted days. Cecil was like one in a dream. His doubts and fears were all forgotten; he never noticed, never recollected, never questioned. He would have been content to drift on like this for ever, lulled and bound by the sweetest sorcery that ever breathed from a woman's presence, or lived in her smiles and words.

Untrammelled by conventionality, yet restrained within all limits of courtesy, with all the gentle license of friendship, and yet none of the spoken longings of love, feeling that passion was tacitly prescribed to certain bounds which might not be overstepped, that companionship was only granted on certain conditions unspoken, but yet clearly implied, so the time passed on, and to Cecil it seemed that life had suddenly paused, that to look back or to look forward was alike undesirable, that the joys of the immediate moment filled his troubled soul with every blessing he could desire, and every joy life could fulfil.

Eight days of such existence as this, and then came a change. It was a Sunday morning, and on the previous evening Faustine had asked him to come to her early. When he arrived at Le Caprice he found her dressed in walking attire. "I want you to come to church with me," she said after their usual greeting. "Will you?"

"I would go anywhere with you," said Cecil impulsively. "What church is it?"

"She mentioned a quiet little unpretentious building some distance off—a church they had noticed in one of their many rambles.

Cecil felt the colour rise to his brow as he heard. "I do not hold with the Roman Catholic religion," he said coldly.

"But your family are all members of its Church," she said, in affected surprise.

"Yes; and I was baptized a member of its community, only I have forsaken it now. I cannot reconcile its doctrines to my conscience. I hate to see that inveterate striving after worldly power and so-called spiritual influence, which are the destruction of pure and earnest godliness in its priesthood. To me its system seems full of errors and deception!"

"But it has merits as well as errors, you must allow. I think it suits the needs of our natures in many ways. That feeling of irresponsibility—that knowledge of a burden lifted from our own souls and eased by counsel and direction—that sensation of relief produced by the confession of all our sins and weaknesses, the constant knowledge of advice and help at our service—surely these are advantages not to be lightly considered."

Cecil looked at her gravely and sadly.

"Oh, madame!" he said, "can such sophistries blind you? You talk of irresponsibility. Can there be such a thing in any soul once awakened to the knowledge of its own immortality, the need of its own salvation, the sins and errors that envelope it here? How can another soul equally responsible, another power equally erring, relieve it of the burden of its own heritage of sin—the life-long weight of its own wrong-doing? These are but priestly arguments you have used—put into your mouth for a purpose—but surely not convincing. Half Rome's priests do not themselves believe what they are bound to teach; and the zealots and the bigots are made fools in the hands of cooler and more calculating despots. It is true they have wielded an enormous influence over the world for centuries. They have been in the heart of conspiracies, the destinies of empires, the secrets of state and throne; but at the bottom of all the power and all the sway so exercised, where is the true practice of the religion they profess, the integrity of the pure faith they pretend to hold?"

She moved aside restlessly.

"You have studied the subject more attentively than I have done," she said. "Let us argue it out as we walk. You will come with me to-day at least, will you not?"

"You know you have but to express a wish and it is a command to me," he answered gravely, as he followed her out from the house and walked beside her down the sloping path that led to the villa gates.

"But my wish to-day is not an agreeable one, so far as your feelings are concerned?"

"To be candid, it is not. The misfortune is my own,

of course. I have grown weary of rituals. The 'temple not made with hands,' the temple of Nature's formation, in green woods, under desert palms, that is where I have most truly worshipped."

"Have you no settled creed at all?" she asked, looking at him curiously.

"If you mean the sort of creed that goes to one particular church, follows one special form of service—no. I believe in God as He has revealed Himself; in Christ, as a Mediator and Saviour; but fail to see that a peculiar set of prayers or particular form of ritual are necessary to the salvation or the manifestation of a religious life. As for committing one's conscience to a priest, one's faith to tradition, one's soul to a finite creature's dictum—these things are beyond me altogether!"

Faustine listened in silence. "The task is beyond me," she thought to herself. "I could never blind his reason, even if I bound his life."

And in her heart she was glad of it. She was used to sway men so easily, to reign so completely, that this mingled struggle between his love and his higher nature in Cecil Calverley's mind, was both novel and refreshing. She would not have cared to see him so utterly in bondage, that even reason fell before passion; she revered all the more a soul that was honest to its own faith and loyal to its higher nature, because in her previous experience of men she had recognised no such soul and believed in no such nature.

She looked at him at last, that smile on her lips and in her eyes that gave them such wonderful charm. "You are right, I believe, although my own ideas are naturally opposed to such views as you hold. But then I have not cared to think, and have been content to accept direction. Yet the Church you abuse has always seemed to me one of comfort and compassion. It holds such remedies for mental suffering, such anodyne for mortal pain."

"A remedy that is only the temporary satisfying of doubts, an anodyne that only lulls pain to brief forgetfulness. I know how powerfully that Church appeals to women, what an immense relief it appears to afford to all tempest-tossed souls vexed with the question of right and wrong and unable to justify either to themselves. But untold danger lurks both in the remedy and the opiate, for they work on noble grounds, chiefly for base purposes, wringing from false remorse or acute self-abasement all the confessions of weakness, the upbraidings of self-reproach. They make these not a penitent's relief, but a victim's scourge!"

"With such views and such opinions I dare not ask you to

come to my church to-day," said Faustine. "Come, we will linger out our morning in the woods, and I will do penance for us both to-night. But I should like to know why you hold views so opposed to those of your family. As a rule, the religion we are born to, is the religion we follow. It never occurred to me to question what I was taught. But in your nature, I suppose, liberty of thought and action go together?"

"I think they do," he answered, seating himself beside her on a rough bench that some peasant hands had erected in the heart of those tranquil woods. "And yet, after all, is one ever free?"

His eyes rested on her as he asked the question, and her own sank before that troubled and pain-filled gaze.

"Men can be so if they choose," she answered a little impatiently. "It is women who are in endless bondage—to the world, to themselves, to your sex, to their own. But this is not what I asked. Tell me of your youth—your first doubts—the reasons of your change of faith. It will be a 'sermon in the woods' more entertaining than those homilies of the priests you seem to despise."

She spoke bitterly and coldly, and Cecil noted the change in voice and face.

"Would you care to hear?" he asked humbly; and in answer to her affirmation he briefly sketched that troubled youth of his, when a religion of nature and reason opposed itself to one of creeds and superstition. How his mind, searching through a mass of myths and symbolisms, and grown weary of doctrine, had flung off the yoke of priestly dictation, and turned to the simple truths of inspiration for guidance and for peace. As Faustine listened, she marvelled no longer at the difficulties with which Père Jerome had to contend, but her whole soul rebelled against the task appointed, at the baseness which had bidden her fetter this young, brave, ardent life in the bonds of passion, and so holding it at her mercy, woo the soul from its allegiance, and, with the bait of a base reward, force it to turn renegade to its noblest feelings.

Her eyes grew soft, her heart beat high as she listened to his words; but every word seemed to put him further away from herself. Beside his life her own looked dark with evil, bitter with bondage, and nothing could free her, she knew. Nothing now.

"Do you think I was right?" he asked her gently at last.

"Right?" she said wearily; and turned her eyes away from those that sought them with so passionate an appeal. "How can I tell? Right—wrong—they are but terms whose meaning the fatalist, the infidel, the Christian, the

man of the world, all apply in different ways. According to your own views you were right, undoubtedly. According to mine—you were wrong."

He started, and his eyes looked pained as well as surprised.

"You believe in these impostures, then?" he said bitterly.

"*Pardon, monsieur.* I believe in the faith of my family and country. It contents me. It may have errors, as all religions have, but your arguments cannot shake my belief."

They were the words she was bound to speak, and she spoke them; but in her heart she despised herself for doing so.

"Then I have nothing more to say," he answered gravely.

"If you are satisfied, doubtless you are happy. That I am neither one, nor other, cannot affect you. Let us change the subject."

"On the contrary, monsieur, we will keep to it. Could nothing win you back to the old faith? Could nothing reclaim you to the Church you have forsaken?"

He looked at her in unfeigned surprise. His face grew a shade paler. "Why do you ask?" he said.

"Because a time has come when I may put to the test your oft-repeated words and promises. If I said to you there are certain terms on which alone our friendship can continue—what then?"

He grew white to the very lips. "Terms!" he said hoarsely. "Ah! you know well you may ask what you will of me. I can refuse you nothing. Only—do not say our—friendship—must end. Friendship! You know it is not *that*! You must have known it long. You forbade me to speak and I have been silent. What do your words mean now?"

"This," she said, very calmly and slowly. "You probably think I am too much a woman of the world to trouble my head much about religious matters. But you are mistaken. My greatest and only ambition once was to enter a convent. I was dissuaded from that intention, but I have never forgotten it. I am a devotee of the Church you abhor. I am bound to submit to its directions in all matters of conscience. Well, in a few words, I have been forbidden further intercourse with you because you are—a heretic!"

For a moment Cecil looked at her as if bewildered. Then he laughed aloud. "You are not ruled by such childish nonsense. You *cannot* be! Good Heavens! What harm can I do you? I have no desire to shake your faith. I do not even seek to disturb it, if you are content. But forbidden association with me because I hold different opinions! Madame, surely you see the folly and injustice of such

arbitrary dealings with your private life and actions ! You cannot mean that you accept such commands and obey them ?"

"I have no choice."

A contemptuous smile curled Cecil's lips. "Nay, madame, you are but playing with me. Since when has this extraordinary submission fettered one so frank and unconventional as yourself ? I have had no hint of it, till to-day."

"It is but a week that you have spent here—a short space of time to learn everything concerning me."

"A long enough space to learn all I care to know," he said impulsively. "Your words are doubly cruel after all the kindness of this past week. You cannot mean that a difference of religious opinion is sufficient reason to banish me from your presence ?"

"As I said before, it is not my will that interferes in the matter."

"And you can still believe in the integrity of a faith that is simply a tyrannous abuse of the confidence it exacts ! I thought your mind would rise superior to such a plausible doctrine. Oh ! pause and consider before you make me its victim too, for you know what your words mean."

He had sprung to his feet and faced her, and his voice shook with a passionate entreaty that went straight to her heart. But she answered very coldly : "I told you nothing but harm could come of my friendship. Why did you not believe me ?"

"I *could* not."

The words fell from his lips involuntarily, but his heart had spoken in them, and she felt it.

"You are wronging yourself even now," he went on hurriedly. "It is not your better nature that speaks. God knows I honour you, but I love you too, and it is useless to pretend otherwise. Do not say your words were meant—that you can accept such cold dictation of your actions. I *cannot* leave you. You know it. It were easier—almost—to bend to your will, and for your sake abjure reason and accept—Rome !"

She had her triumph then, as she saw how utterly he was at her mercy—how, for *her* sake, all other opinions, prejudices, feelings were swept aside. But even then she felt it was but the passion of a moment that spoke ; that cooler judgment would show him the folly of his words.

"You speak without consideration," she said coldly. "Have I not told you I can accept no man's love ? From the first I never attempted to deceive you."

"But surely I am not your enemy ! It is true my love

may look presumptuous in your eyes ; nevertheless, you have known for long it was yours."

She looked at him calmly, strangely ; her face pale as her dress, her eyes unspeakably soft and sad.

"I feared as much. But surely you yourself must see that it is folly. No man's love has been offered to me, save at the cost of honour, and whatever I may *seem*, I have not yet sunk so low as to forget that."

The blood flushed Cecil Calverley's face in one burning torrent.

"You surely do not suppose that I—that my love— Oh, madame, have I not said that I believe in you against all testimony ? Can I offer you stronger proof than when I place my life at your service ?—when I pray you to let me shield you with name and honour from the world that has wronged you ? No matter what it thinks, no matter what you are, only believe I love you, and say you will have pity on that love."

His voice broke. He looked at her and saw how her face changed from white to red, and how her eyes sank before the fire of his own. He was mad now with the madness of that first wild passion of youth ; the passion that says, "No matter if this woman be false or true, let her but be mine." All the nobility and strength of his life were like reeds in her grasp at this moment. He would have denied her nothing had she only whispered of the reward of herself as payment to the demand.

She knew this, and the knowledge touched her with the sharpest humiliation, the keenest pain her life had ever known. She saw how fatally her work had been done ; how this chivalrous idolatry would listen to no evil did she but claim its faith ; how the heart and soul and life of this one man were hers to bind at will. But she knew also that in this moment it was but the baser alloy that passion is to love, that spoke in his words and flung him helpless at her mercy. It was the moment she had been directed to watch for—the madness she had been bidden to arouse ; and yet now, in the supreme hour of her success, she recoiled from an act so base, and her whole heart thrilled with an intense and infinite pity for the young lover who had laid his heart at her feet.

For a moment silence reigned. She could not speak ; and pride and shame, and something sweeter and more perilous still, swayed her by turns.

Within the solitude of the woods the heat and lustre of the day were shut out ; there was only a faint gleam of sunlight here and there between the close dense foliage ; a faint rustle of leaves as some breath of air, or wing of bird, stirred them to and fro.

It was all so peaceful, so still, so fair—a scene and a moment each dangerous in its allurements, subtle in the peace and stillness, and fragrance and beauty that seemed to shut them in from the fret and fever of the outer world, and bid them listen only to the language of their own beating hearts.

The spell of such a moment, the sorcery of such an hour had never before touched the senses of either. All other things seemed of little account now. Wealth, fame, ambition, honour, all looked like things far off and shadowy and indistinct. There is no blindness like the blindness of passion, grown dizzy with the rapture of its own promises, and the danger of its own desires.

To Faustine love had so long seemed a folly to be scorned, a weakness to be ruled, a tool to be handled for many ignoble purposes, that now, in this moment, she almost trembled as she saw revealed the strength and depth of feelings that she had never credited herself with possessing. She knew at last that she loved this young, frank, loyal life; and loved it, too, with a worship that revered where it adored, that held all other things of earth worthless in comparison; loved as she had never thought it was in her to love, seeing how that word had hitherto only meant for her a weakness impossible to her nature, a passion to which her heart was dead.

That long moment passed, but the spell of silence lay still upon her lips, and chained back the words that rushed to the gates of sound from the prison-house of feeling. A stillness as of death seemed all around; even the low sighs of the wind had ceased, and the far-off murmur of unseen waters alone broke the intense and trancelike calm.

He knelt down on the soft green sward and drew her hands within his own. "Have I angered you?" he asked brokenly. "Will you not even—look?"

He felt her fingers tremble in his clasp, and saw the quickened heaving of her breast; and then, as if involuntarily, the white lids were lifted and her eyes looked back to his. A look—only a look—but it thrilled him with a hope so sweet, so rich, so entrancing that the very joy it gave made his heart ache with ecstasy. The lights and shadows all swam before his eyes. Through the haze of fluttering foliage he could only see the divine beauty of that one face, and the eyes that were so lustrous and eloquent in their meaning.

"You are not angry? You forgive?" he murmured breathlessly. "You—you do not hate me?"

"Hate you? No!"

It was only a whisper, but it called him back to the con-

sciousness of a joy so wild and sweet and passionate, that he trembled as he held her hands against his lips.

"I love you—you—love me?" he whispered. "Is it so?"

"Ah yes!"

The words were so low, so gently spoken, that they seemed to hold nothing in common with the sovereignty and pride of the woman who spoke them. Such glory and gladness came to her face that Cecil, even as he looked, could scarcely credit it had been in his power to bring them there.

"Say it once more—once more," he implored, and every doubt had vanished now, and all the sweetest imaginings of his dream looked cold and unreal before this new-found glory.

She drew her hands from his own, and laid them one on either shoulder, and so, looking down into his burning eyes with a world of eloquence in her own, murmured with an infinite tenderness that had now no tremor of weakness, but only a passion of regret, "It is true;—I *love* you!"

He heard, and the truth of her meaning, the joy of her words, thrilled to his very soul. He drew her arms about his neck, and saw the proud head stoop towards him, bowed by the sweetest weakness of subjugation. And though the sunlight quivered through the boughs, and beyond the haze and dimness of that canopy of leaves the golden day was shining, earth and air and life held no glory so great, no beauty so entrancing, as the joy that thrilled from heart to heart, when the tremulous touch of those meeting lips gave their first love-kiss each to other.

CHAPTER VII

"TOUCH LIPS AND PART WITH TEARS"

FOR once the weakness of womanhood conquered every other thought and feeling; for once in all her life of mingled triumph, sorrow, shame, regret, Faustine knew what happiness might mean; but even in the supreme ecstasy of that moment an icy hand seemed to fall upon her heart; a harsh voice sounded in her ear its mandate of coercion.

A sigh that was almost a sob burst from her breast to her lips, and there brokenly died, as she drew herself away from her young lover's arms, and, shuddering, hid her face on her clasped and trembling hands.

He rose to his feet, and gazed at her wistfully, patiently. Some fear was upon him, too, and some of the old stories came back to his memory of the love that was a lure to

beguile men to misery—of the simulation of passion that sought only to cheat and to destroy.

“What is it?” he faltered, as he looked at the down-bent head, the hidden face.

She lifted it then and looked at him, but all the light and glory had left it now; it was pale as the dead, and in her eyes was an anguish deeper than tears.

“Need you ask *that*?” she said bitterly, and rose to her feet also, and wrung her hands despairingly together as she saw the agony of his face.

“Oh! I have been mad—worse than mad. Love! What can love be to me? What have I to do with such a feeling?”

Cecil looked at her silently, the dread in his heart growing deeper. She calmed herself at last by a great effort, and came back to the seat and made a sign to him to take his place beside her.

“Listen,” she said. “In a moment of madness I betrayed myself; yet since you know that I love you I cannot deceive you any longer. But it is because I love you that I feel my own unworthiness—that I cannot and will not accept your sacrifice. No; do not speak. Between our lives there is nothing in common. You are of noble family; I—well, you know what the world calls me. It were better—ten thousand times better—that, like the world, you should scorn, despise, condemn—than honour me, as in your frank and chivalrous heart you do! Your wife! Could I do you such an endless wrong as to take that title upon me? Heaven forgive me! I *could* not.”

“May I not judge of that?” said Cecil gently. “What the world says, matters little to me. Only tell me you are *not* what it thinks you. From your own lips alone will I take your condemnation.”

For a moment, as she saw how vain it was to shake his faith or lessen the adoration of his love, a mad, heroic impulse tempted her to utter that condemnation. So alone might he be free—so alone might she in some measure repair the wrong she had already done. But the task was beyond her strength. All the tenderness and pity she felt for him—all the love so long denied her life, and now thrilling her heart with its mingled rapture and regret, forbade the utterance of such words as would make her in his sight vile and worthless.

“I am—*not* what it thinks me!” she said proudly; “but all the same, I can be nothing to you!”

“You do not mean that,” he said hoarsely. “I love you—I believe in you—and you have said you loved me too. These words bind your life to mine. By all I have suffered, by all

the love I have borne you from the first hour we met, do not tell me I must leave you now—that you will be nothing to me?”

“You do not claim me by the debt I owe—by the life you saved—you are too generous for that,” she said involuntarily; and a mist of tears dimmed her sight, and, for a moment, shut out the pleading face before her. “Ah, Cecil! you are too noble for me; if I never knew it before, I know it now.”

He laughed contemptuously.

“We waste words,” he said. “I know, of course, what you think stands between us—a barrier to all love, as, a few moments ago, you said it was to all friendship. Is that your only reason for pronouncing marriage impossible?”

“Is it not enough? I have been forbidden all intercourse with you—I told you that—save on one condition.”

“And that?”

“Your return to the faith you have abjured.”

“I thought as much,” he said, and his lips closed tight together, but his eyes swept over her face with a passion and entreaty that moved her to the heart.

With all her love for him mingled that sense of protecting fondness that lives in the love of all women to whom girlhood is a thing of the past, and for whom the freshness and youth of years their own outnumber, possess an infinite charm. He seemed to stand on the threshold of a life that to her was an old-told tale; a small thing without charm or allurements, without promise or content; and it smote her with the keenest self-reproach she had ever felt, that her hand must deal him one stroke of suffering, give to him one pang of pain. Yet she saw it must be done, for his sake, even more than for her own.

“I would ask no such sacrifice,” she said. “You have chosen your faith; I have been vowed to mine. So be it. You love me, you say—yes, but even you must see the folly of such a feeling. What is there in common between us two? What would your family, your friends, say of the madness you contemplate?”

“Let them say what they will; so you are mine?”

She shook her head sadly and regretfully. “That is not reason speaking now. I must think for you, as you will not think for yourself. A woman can do a man no greater wrong than to take advantage of the hot passionate impulses of youth, and bind him to herself in a bondage that places him before all the world as a victim. I am reaping the fruits of my own folly now. Heaven knows whether, if I had met you earlier, or dreamt that loyalty and chivalry still lived in the heart of any man, I might not have been different. But

regrets are useless. You know what my name is in all men's belief. Could I take your stainless life and make it one with mine? Could I bear to hear you pitied, blamed, condemned? You see—you must see what I mean! You have noble principles; you have a stainless name; you have your own bold, steadfast creeds of right and wrong, honour and dishonour; what am I that I should take my place beside you? The woman you wed should be pure and true; her life blameless; her past an open book, on whose white pages no other hand but yours has traced a name. I know myself better than you know me. I am far enough from being such a woman. I could do you no greater wrong than to take advantage of your trust, and give you my love and—myself.”

He had listened silently, but not with patience. Now the torrent of his own mad longings burst forth from heart to lips, and across the calmer reasoning of her words broke out the hot vehement passion of his own.

“Your love is to me a gift so priceless that it outweighs all other considerations. Since I believe in you—since I love you, can you not set the world at defiance, for my sake? There is nothing you can ask, that I would refuse to do for you.”

“Even return to—Rome?”

The words fell on him like a shock, chilling his ardour and calming his turbulent emotion. Why did she always speak of that? Could it be—but no, he banished the thought ere it had time to whisper of so unjust a suspicion. Then suddenly he met her eyes, and forgot all else; and, ere she was aware of his intention, his arms were round her, and he pressed her to his breast, while an agonised entreaty burst from his lips:

“Why, oh why do you torture me thus? You know what my love is. But that one thing I cannot do; for every impulse of reason, every instinct of my nature rebels against what is false and treacherous, and Rome is both. Yet why need this mere difference of opinion sever us? I would be no hindrance to your faith; and did you but love me as you said, nothing could part us now. For my sake you would set your priests at defiance!”

A strange smile stole to her lips. As she rested in his arms, as his heart beat with wild swift throbs against her own, it seemed to her that all the joy she could ever know in life was hers for that one moment; but, even if for her love's sake she was weak, for his sake she was strong. She knew that she must sever herself from him for ever, if indeed she would serve him at all; and with one last despairing effort she thrust aside the cup of bliss her lips had scarcely tasted, and drew herself from him with almost angry impatience.

"Why do you urge what is impossible?" she said. "I do not—love—you enough for that."

His arms fell to his side; his face grew as white as her dress.

"You speak as you have been bidden to speak," he said bitterly. "It is not your heart that prompts you. But I cannot accept dismissal so lightly; you are all I live for now. If I must leave you, none the less is my love yours, and yours alone. Will nothing change your resolve? Have you no pity?"

She dared not look at him, for her eyes were dimmed with tears and her lips were trembling as she tried to speak. She had given many other lives wretchedness, despair, madness; now something of it all seemed to recoil upon her own.

"Yours is the noblest trust I have ever had given to me," she said with a strange humility; "but I cannot wrong it. Believe what you may—think me a mad fanatic, a pitiless trifler, what you will—only believe that to you I can be nothing; that from this hour life holds naught in common for us."

As her voice broke over that final word, a great despair came over the loyal young heart, whose love had been so freely given, whose faith received so cruel a recompence.

"You lied to me when you said you loved me!" he cried fiercely—so fiercely that, as she recognised her work again, she trembled and grew sick at heart. "Love! you do not know even what it means!"

"In your sense, no," she answered almost humbly. "Believe that, and it will be best. Need there be more said between us now?"

"More? My God! Have you no compassion for me? You know that my love for you is all my life to me; that though death came by you, I would not leave you if you bade me stay."

"It is a worse thing than death from which I would save you," she murmured falteringly.

He scarcely heard or heeded; his heart was too full of pain. He only looked at her with an agony of appeal that stung her with sharpest reproach.

"Leave me now," she entreated faintly. "You cannot understand, and I—I cannot explain. Give me time to think what is best—best for you. Come to me to-night, but leave me now. I can bear—no—more——"

Something in the sad weary voice, the drooped head, the utter dejection of the woman who was wont to rule so graciously, to see all bend to the supremacy of her beauty, touched him more than any words.

"It is hard to leave you," he said. "But—if you promise——"

"Yes, I promise," she said hurriedly. "Come to me to-night, and you shall have your answer."

He bowed low before her with no other word, and then went away through the noonday dusk of the shady woods, leaving her to the solitude she had craved—unconscious of the agony that solitude would witness.

She bent her face upon her clasped hands and shuddered from head to foot. No relief of tears was hers in this moment—only a fierceness born of sheer torture; a brooding horror of her life—her tyrant—herself—that wrung her soul to its very depths, that were beyond all power of words to paint.

"I have been led into cruelty and error; there is no straight path for my feet to tread now!" she moaned at last. "My God! what shall I do! what shall I do!"

She raised her colourless face and looked despairingly up at the blue sky through the shining network of leaves above her head. "He will never believe it is for his sake!" she almost sobbed, as she pressed her locked and quivering fingers against her heart. "Oh, my love! my love! it is not the world's scorn or the world's rebuke I fear—what is it to me compared with love like yours?—it is the future I dread; that future when you would see your youth had been sold into bondage for a woman's selfish passion. It is from yourself I wish to save you at any cost. God in heaven give me strength to be true to what is best for you—only for you!"

And her tears fell down like rain.

CHAPTER VIII

CAN OBLIVION BE BOUGHT?

For the glass of years is brittle
Wherein we gaze for a span.

WITHIN a darkened room at Strathavon Castle the old Earl lay dying.

Lord Malden and his youngest brother Harcourt had both been hastily summoned, and were now beside him. Grave-faced physicians moved to and fro. The last and most sacred rites of the Church had been administered, and the old man lay back on his pillows, to all appearance calm and at rest. Suddenly he opened his eyes, and made a sign to Père Jerome. The priest bent down and looked anxiously at the ashy face and sunken eyes.

"Has he come?" whispered the dying man.

"I grieve to say he has not," answered the priest. "It is as I feared."

"Send them all away," came the whisper, agitated now and commanding. "All ! I must speak to you alone !"

A few words from Père Jerome cleared the room, and once more he bent over the dying man. The Earl looked up in his face, and his lips moved. He seemed strangely agitated.

"Tell me—again," he said.

"Nay, my lord ; why trouble yourself about one so unworthy ? Tell you ! What good to tell you that he prefers a courtesan's smiles to a father's dying blessing ! His own conduct proves that."

"And you are—sure—he is with her ?"

"Have I not shown you her own letter, where she says he will marry her if she but says the word ? She would say it soon enough, I doubt not, were he the elder instead of the second son."

"Son ! he is no son of mine," cried the old man, with a sudden paroxysm of wrath fearful to witness. "I cast him off ; I disown him. Listen, father. Malden has agreed to cut off the entail. The deeds are ready. I put off signing them till the last moment, to give him one last chance. He has forfeited that. Renegade to his faith, his family, his home, I cast him off for ever. My curse rest upon him and his henceforth. He is no more of us. Summon Malden and the lawyer. I am strong still—strong enough for this. He shall see I am not to be offended with impunity."

Passion and anger gave him a strange strength. He raised himself in the bed, and signed impatiently to the priest to obey his commands.

With apparent reluctance the worthy man moved to the door and gave the necessary instructions. A moment later the lawyers, doctors, and Lord Malden entered the room. It seemed as if the excitement of feeling had given a fictitious strength to the dying man. His cheeks were faintly coloured, his eyes had brightened. The business did not take very long. As his signature was affixed to the deed the Earl sank back on his pillows, exhausted to all appearance. Then he drew from his breast two letters and placed them in the hands of his eldest son. "Give that to—him—after my—death," he whispered faintly. "It will—explain. Read the other—yourself !"

A sudden spasm of pain contracted his face. He drew his breath sharply. The physician came near and bent over him with anxious eyes. A great silence was in the room—that hush of expectation which waits for the last flutter of dying breath, the last flicker of failing life.

The white moon that shone without on all the noble lands of that vast estate, shone also through one of the casements

of the great chamber. The eyes of the dying man turned longingly, eagerly to that pure soft light. He had received the last services of the Church; his worldly affairs were all settled; those whom he loved best in his own selfish, haughty fashion were beside him: his mind should have been at peace now; and yet—— He moved restlessly, and, seeing Père Jerome close beside the physician, made a sign to him to stoop down.

"I have—done—right?" he whispered faintly.

"Surely, my son," answered the priest softly and graciously. "As the minister of Christ and the Holy Church, I have absolved you from your sins. Your act is no more than justice; it preserves to your *lawful* heirs what might otherwise have——"

"Hush!—I know," muttered the dying man. "Yes—you are right—of course you are right—only——"

The words died off his lips; a sudden light and eagerness came into his face. "Steps!" he cried. "It is—Cecil!"

As the word was uttered the door of the room was thrown open. Dusty, haggard, travel-stained, his son stood before him—his face white almost as his own, his eyes feverish and dark with anxiety and dread.

As he approached the bed, the priest's face grew black with anger. He lifted his hand with a gesture of warning, but Cecil took no heed; only came nearer and bent over the dying man and looked tenderly at the worn and suffering face.

"Father!" he murmured.

As if the sound of that word had galvanised him into sudden life, the old Earl sprang up from the priest's supporting arms, and his flashing eyes looked defiantly at those compassionate ones of his son.

"I am *not*—that," he said, and then, exhausted by the effort, fell back on his pillow.

The silver light of the moonrays streamed still through the open casement; streamed soft and pure upon the amazed and troubled faces of that startled group, on the malice and triumph in the dark eyes of the priest, and the ashy, colourless face of the dead man, whom he had deceived.

Then he sank on his knees and murmured one of the prayers of the Church he served.

"Why was I not told of this in time?" asked Cecil, as he stood in the library a short time afterwards with Lord Malden and his brother Harcourt. Père Jerome looked quickly up from his chair at the three brothers standing by the window. He was thinking how well he had timed his schemes.

"I only learnt it by chance—through seeing an English newspaper," continued Cecil. "What were you all thinking of that you could not let me know?"

"You forget, my son, that you gave us no place of address when you left Strathavon," interposed the priest; "I telegraphed to you at your usual hotel in Paris. Did you not receive my message?"

"I was not in Paris," said Cecil brusquely.

"Oh!" resumed Père Jérôme placidly; "that accounts for the delay."

"My dear Cecil," said his eldest brother, "if you will go rushing off to foreign countries in that erratic fashion of yours, you need hardly be surprised that no one knows where to find you in any sudden case of emergency. We knew nothing about you. Père Jerome thought you might be in Paris, but you say you never received his messages."

"No," said Cecil abruptly. He seemed restless and disturbed, and the priest's keen eyes watching him from the shadowy corner, noted how worn and ill he looked, how terribly altered from what he had been on the occasion of his last visit to Strathavon.

"Was he ill long?" asked Cecil at length.

"Only a few days," answered Lord Malden. He was embarrassed and restrained in Cecil's presence. He knew that his brother was still ignorant of what had been done respecting the property, and was half afraid of the wrath and indignation that such an action would arouse. Cecil loved every rood of land, every stone in the grand old Castle of Strathavon, but to Lord Malden such love seemed senseless and absurd. What was the use of an encumbered estate? What good were sentimental fancies that were a bar to profitable investments, or financial advantages? Still he could not meet his brother's eyes with comfort and ease, and he was thankful when Cecil, complaining of fatigue after his hurried journey, left the room for his own apartments, and relieved him of the embarrassment of his presence.

Once in his dressing-room and alone, Cecil threw himself down on a couch by the window and buried his face in his hands. He sat there quite still, quite motionless for long; when at last he raised his face it looked so sad, so changed, that even to himself it seemed to bear little resemblance to the frank, fearless, bright young visage that had been wont to look back at him a few months before.

He rose impatiently and threw open the window, and leaned out in the still soft beauty of the summer night; but the coolness seemed as the heat of flame, and the beauty dark and distant. The haggard face, the heavy eyes, the

sigh whose bitterness echoed in the silence from the fulness of a heart aching beneath a burden that seemed too heavy to be borne, all told their own tale. As his burning eyes turned restlessly from glade to glade, from park to woodland, he seemed to remember with a pang of fierce regret all that had come to him since last he had stood here and looked on this same scene. He leant his face on his hands and groaned aloud. "Shall I ever forget?" he cried. "My God! shall I ever forget?"

It was the cry of an intense despair, an inward torture, the memory of a madness sweet as all vain, hopeless, passion looks to the eyes that behold in it but one word, "Forbidden." And as his voice echoed through the stillness, the very silence seemed to mock the wildness of that prayer whose craving for oblivion was neither new nor strange.

He took from his breast a little folded tumbled note, and the clear moonrays fell on it and lit up as with flame the words he knew so fatally well.

It contained the promised answer to his love, the answer he had sought from Faustine's lips, and found penned by a hand that had indeed seemed to him without mercy.

"Forgive me if you can: forget me, as you will. I am the promised wife of the Comte de Besançon."

That was all she had written, and his prayer to see her had been refused. •

There are some natures which sorrow hardens, some which it crushes and breaks. Cecil Calverley's was one of the former. He had loved Faustine with a pure overmastering, passionate, and absorbing devotion. For her he would have made any sacrifice and counted it naught. His life had been in her hands, his heart had lain at her feet; and yet at the very moment when he had felt most sure of her, when he had read in her eyes the acknowledgment of her own love for himself, she had played him false. The revelation came to him as an awful shock—a lightning stroke that shattered all his faith and trust in women, all the peace and content of his own life; but it had done him much harm, and he knew it, and at times felt as great a hatred of the woman who had deceived him, as ever he had felt a love. If much that was good in him had escaped unharmed from the anguish and horror of this first betrayal, yet none the less had much that was evil been aroused and given a life hitherto unknown and undreamt of. His love had been as a whirlwind that swept aside all reason and restraint, and, being suddenly arrested in its course, worked fury and ruin for revenge.

All his previous faiths, his gentle chivalry, his pure

dreams, his noblest ideals, were shattered in the dust as he learnt how love tempts only to betray, how falsehood lurks in fairest garb, how eyes can speak sweetest hopes to veil the heart's foulest lies. He had left Deauville when that fatal letter had been given him, and roamed hither and thither, he scarcely knew where. But go where he would, that fatal memory pursued him. In scenes of recklessness, in mad orgies that once he would have died sooner than share, in every pursuit and occupation by which he strove to drown thoughts and memory, that fair face still haunted him with incessant persistence, that silvery voice still rang its mocking music in his ear, denying him solitude and forbidding him forgetfulness.

When suddenly arrested by the chance news of his father's dangerous illness, he had almost mechanically taken his way back to England. But even now, with that deathbed scene so recently enacted fresh in his memory, his thoughts were less of it than of the sorceress who had so fatally beguiled him.

As he crushed the tiny perfumed note in his hand he thought afresh of the fascinations that one by one had woven around him that web of doom, of the loveliness that haunted him as incessantly as when first he had seen it, and the bitterness of his anger, and the fierceness of his pain, combined to wrest that cry from his lips: "Oh, to forget, to forget!"

Ah, Heaven! if only the waters of Lethe flowed among the rivers of earth, what price would not be paid for one draught of that priceless stream! For of all the woes and sorrows that life counts as its own, there are few indeed whose bitterness may not be intensified by the anguish of remembrance.

CHAPTER IX

When sorrows come they come not single spies,
But in battalions.—*Shakespeare.*

THE bright morning sun was streaming over the beech and elm groves, the terraces and park, the whole great diadem of noble woods around Strathavon; streaming in golden prodigality of the light and life it gave, and with a contemptuous disregard of the panoply of woe within and without those stately walls. What cares Nature for sorrow or for death; for the woes of great or poor, noble or com-

moner, aristocrat or plebeian? Nothing indeed. She is wise enough to know that all mortality shares one common fate, that to those who are clad in purples or shiver in rags there is but one end—"The end of all, the popped sleep."

There had been darkness and mourning in the great household at Strathavon, and people had moved to and fro throughout its stately chambers with hushed step and bated breath. The presence of death had been felt for all these long fair summer days, and gloom and melancholy had reigned instead of life and mirth. Now once more the blinds were drawn up from the darkened windows, and the dead presence in that stately chamber where lights had burned and incense floated and prayers been softly murmured these many days, had been removed to its last resting-place, and a new king reigned where the old monarch had resigned place and sceptre, and Gerald Francis, the new Earl of Strathavon, stepped into his honours in place of the Lord Malden of the previous week.

The funeral was over, the will had been read, and then, at the request of the firm who had so long managed the business affairs of the family, Cecil and Harcourt and the Earl had met in the library to hear of some later arrangements respecting the estates.

Cecil had come indifferently enough. These business technicalities and legal details had little interest for him. It was all very well for Malden, he thought, but he was only a second son, and—His wondering thoughts were arrested at this juncture by some words addressed to himself. He shook off his preoccupation and listened, at first wonderingly, then with a sense of burning indignation and unspeakable amazement.

When the long deed had been read and the ominous crackling of the parchment alone broke the stillness, he turned abruptly to his brother. "Gerald, is this true? What is the meaning of it?" he asked sternly.

"My father thought it best," answered the new Earl. "The estates are very much encumbered—terribly so. Some part of them must go, that is certain. For the rest—I will explain it to you privately. Cecil, it was my father's request."

Cecil looked at the young man's face. They had never had much in common, these two brothers. Their natures were totally unlike, even as their tastes and habits; but some shadow of future ill seemed to cross Cecil's mind—a vague sense of evil approaching fell on his heart as he met Gerald's eyes.

The legal dignities took their departure with a ceremonious

farewell. Harcourt, with an uncomfortable feeling that his two elder brothers had some unpleasant subjects to discuss, followed their example. Cecil turned expectantly to the new Lord Strathavon. "Well," he said, "may I ask now the reason of this extraordinary proceeding?"

"Do not take it in bad part, Cecil," said his brother, speaking hurriedly and with evident disquietude. "You know—you must know—what weights of debt and difficulty hamper us. We have been devils for extravagance always—none more so than our poor father. Well, it all comes to an inevitable end. We must do something or—smash. He explained this, and I, not being hampered with any sentimental fancies for stones and wood, agreed to cut off the entail. Some—I fear a great part of the property—must go——"

"But not Strathavon," interrupted Cecil passionately. "Surely, Gerald, things are not so bad as that?"

"They are pretty bad," said his brother gloomily. "I am not sure if, after all, I shan't have to accept office for the sake of emolument, much as I dislike the bore of ministerial service. I shall have enough to do to satisfy my creditors now, and they're sure to be all down upon me since they know of my new dignities." He laughed a little bitterly. "After all, Cis, it won't be so bad for you. Rest assured I shall do all that's best. I know you have a sentimental fancy for the old place, and I don't intend to let it go out of the family if I can help it. But, of course, I shall marry now, and marry money. I have no choice. You see——"

"I know perfectly well what you mean," answered Cecil haughtily. "Of course I have no business to entertain any thought of inheritance. Second sons count for naught. It is not that that troubles me, Gerald. I love the place dearly. It has been in our family for centuries. To me the idea of parting with any portion of it to strangers is hateful—sacrilegious! Were I you I would work, slave, starve almost, sooner than sell my birthright!"

"Yes; I know you have exalted ideas," resumed Lord Strathavon. "But I have no taste for work, or beggary either. By-the-bye, I forgot to give you a letter my father left with me. He said it would explain his reasons more clearly. He gave me one at the same time. I locked it up here with yours, and never thought any more about it. Perhaps we had better read them now."

He walked over to a small oaken cabinet as he spoke, and unlocking it, took from thence two letters. He handed one to his brother, and then broke the seal of his own.

It contained but a very few words apparently, but whatever they were they served to blanch the colour from his cheeks, and fill his eyes with a sort of incredulous horror, as, crushing the letter in his hand, he swung round and faced his brother.

Cecil was standing near one of the great bay-windows of the library, the full rich splendour^o of the sunlight falling on his hair, and lighting up the young, worn, haggard face, that was so strangely altered. Lord Strathavon's eyes swept over that face now with an amazed and haughty wonder, and as the interrogation of his glance fastened on it, Cecil's brow flushed dusky red, and with a cry of horror the letter dropped from his hands.

For a moment the two brothers stood and faced each other in silence.

Cecil spoke first. "My God! It *cannot* be true. Was he mad when he wrote this?" he cried hoarsely; and into his eyes came an agony of appeal that sought, but sought in vain, for response in the gaze they met. "Gerald," he said more calmly, "tell me you don't believe this—lie! Someone has deceived him. It cannot be true. Would he have concealed it so long, do you think?"

"He speaks of proofs," answered Lord Strathavon icily. "Proofs lately received, and authentic. It is certainly mysterious, but I can now understand his anxiety to disentail the property."

"Gerald! My God! Don't speak like that. Don't say you believe this," implored Cecil—his voice broken and strained with the effort at composure. "Proofs—where are they? Why does he not give them to me? Why should I believe his word when I don't know what evil influence and sophistry may have influenced him?"

"Rest assured, the matter shall be investigated," answered Lord Strathavon, still in the same cold measured voice. "For our own sakes we must see to its justice. To me it is as great a mystery as to yourself."

"But do you *believe* it?" exclaimed Cecil, facing him suddenly in the sunlight, a deadly pallor on his face, but his eyes calm, steadfast, unflinching, as they looked at the cold averted face of the brother who had wronged him.

There was no answer save silence.

A glimpse of its meaning came home to Cecil Calverley—a dim perception of the blank in the home circle whence he would be cast out as an alien; of the banishment from beloved possessions; the stigma of dishonour and disgrace. He read his fate in his brother's coldness and disbelief; his lips grew white with the inward agony of that moment; his

heart beat heavily—painfully—in the stillness of that quiet room.

"I see you do," he said, with so strange a calmness that Lord Strathavon never suspected at what cost of inward agony it was bought. "And if you, so near of kin, can doubt so easily, what can I expect of the world in general? Well, until this matter is settled, let us meet as strangers; but you might have remembered, whatever you deem me, that—she—was your mother too!"

His voice broke over those last words. Ashamed of the weakness that would have let him weep like a woman in the physical and mental torture of that hour, he turned abruptly away, and went out of the room, and out of the house, on and on, to the furthest, darkest forest nook, where solitude might be found, longing only to hide himself from every eye, and think out, as dazed brain and agonised thought might permit, the sickening horror of this new-found ill.

"When sorrows come they come not single spies, but in battalions," he might well have said as he threw himself down on the fresh green sward, his face buried in his hands, insensible to all sights and sounds save only the crushing misery within his own heart.

The shock had fallen upon him with as fearful a suddenness as that other shock which had robbed him of youth and love and all life's fairest joys at one lightning stroke. He felt an outcast from all human ties now. Beggared in love, in home, in friends, he seemed to stand alone with the brand of a lifelong shame upon his brow, and a world-wide misery resting on his heart. Moments, hours passed. He knew nothing of them—only lay there heedless of time and all around, with but the consciousness of suffering to remind him of the burden of existence in his numbed and tortured frame.

Brighter and brighter grew the sun, penetrating even through those woodland shadows, pouring its bright rays on the stricken form, the bowed head, the hidden face. Above him, in the trees, the birds sang, and the leaves fluttered, and the hum and stir of insect life murmured about the flowers and ferns; but he only lay there unconscious, unheeding; the bitterness of a fallen pride, the sense of coming degradation oppressing memory with an endless repetition of this new indignity.

"It cannot be true, it cannot," he groaned aloud, as, at last, he lifted his haggard face, and gazed with blind, bewildered eyes at the drooping leaves, the mocking sunlight above his head.

"It is!"

The words, hissing through the intense and drowsy stillness of the woods, startled him with a vague fear. He sprang hastily up, and saw, a few yards before him, the calm inscrutable face of Père Jerome.

Even the luxury of solitude was denied him now. Commanding himself by a strong effort, Cecil drew his tall slight figure to its full height, and fixed his eyes calmly and interrogatingly on those of his old enemy.

For a moment neither spoke. The priest seemed measuring the mental strength of his victim. He had been a silent witness of this past hour's torture, but he would have loved to still further protract the torments his hand had dealt. They repaid him at last, though not in full measure, for the contumacy and rebellion, the indifference and contempt with which this rebel of the Strathavon race had treated him. A man who never forgave a slight, however small, an offence, however trivial, Père Jerome was not likely to forgive or forget all that he had received at the hands of Cecil Calverley.

He came a few steps nearer now, the shadows of the boughs falling on his face, an evil light glittering beneath the drooped lids of his calm dark eyes.

"It is true," he repeated calmly. "I can imagine what you mean. I know, of course—I have long known—this painful secret, the cause of your father's coldness and indifference to yourself. You ask for proofs. They are in my possession. You may have them when you will."

A deep dark flush spread over Cecil's face. Those words, cutting through the woodland stillness, fell, sharp as a scourge on naked flesh, on his tortured heart.

"So, holy father, this is your work? I might have guessed it!"

The calm face never changed, the mocking eyes never winced.

"It is the work of justice and of right," said the priest. "I had a painful duty to perform, but the honour of a noble house was in my keeping. I should not have felt myself justified in withholding the truth, however painful. I am grieved to give you pain, to cast this blemish on your fair youth and its early promise, for though you have strayed from the true fold, we cannot but hope to reclaim and bring you back to peace and rectitude once more. But——"

"A truce to this cant, if you please," said Cecil haughtily. "I am not of your communion. Speak to me as one man to another. Tell me, in few words and plain, what these devilish insinuations mean. What lie has my father gone out of the world believing at your instigation?"

"Your words are not over-courteous, Mr. Cecil," said the priest with a sneer. "And your accusation would force a very different answer from my lips did my habit not forbid strife and bloodshedding. The proofs you need lie here. These are letters written by your mother to—her lover. You start! Ah! doubtless the women of your house have all been true as they were fair, cold as they were proud. They may have been, until the Lady Grace——"

"Silence!" thundered Cecil, all his long pent-up hatred and detestation of this man breaking out at last into one intolerable, passionate longing for vengeance on the ill his hand had so cunningly wrought. "Your habit may protect you from the resentment of insults dealt to me, but, by the heaven above us, it shall not do so, if your lips utter a single word against my mother's purity!"

The priest started, and, despite his iron self-control, the blood flushed his dusky cheek, his lips quivered with a passion of wrath that he longed to let loose, and—dared not.

The force of habit prevailed. The tiger glitter in the dark southern eyes was veiled by the drooping lids. He drew himself up with a serene and gracious dignity.

"What you say in the heat of anger and just disappointment I can forgive. I leave you these papers. You will know, when you read them, whether I have spoken truth or not."

He tossed the packet down at the young man's feet and turned away and left him. But he had seen his suffering. He was repaid.

CHAPTER X

"I have put my days and dreams out of mind."

THE sun was sinking in the west in cloudless splendour, tinging the dark masses of trees with gold, lighting up the grey walls and turret-windows of the quiet retreat where Mère Thérèse reigned supreme over her gentle sisterhood. In the convent gardens a child was standing alone. Her eyes were fixed on the trees above her head, and there was a strange unyouthful melancholy in their glance. "With the autumn leaves," she said softly to herself. "He said he would come with the autumn leaves. They are beginning to fall now!"

Every leaf that fluttered to the earth, every tinge of gold or red on the foliage she watched so anxiously, were signs of meaning and of welcome to her. Through all that summer-time her thoughts had been incessantly of her young

preserver, and of his promise. Always docile and obedient, she had endeared herself very much to those kindly, gentle women in whose care she was placed, but to none of them did her heart open, and of none of them did she think as she thought of Cecil Calverley.

It was very fair and peaceful in the quaint old gardens, and she roamed hither and thither now at will, lifting up the drooping flower bells, gathering here and there a blossom or a spray of leaves, or trailing blade of feathery grass, and winding them into a garland, as the sisters had shown her how to do.

Suddenly she paused, started, and looked round. The sound of a footstep echoed through the quiet shadowed walks—a firm manly tread, unlike those that usually fell there. Her face flushed eagerly. Then a cry of delight escaped her lips, for walking rapidly towards her, under the heavy boughs, where the last faint rays of sunlight lingered, she saw Cecil. She flew to him like a bird, her arms outstretched, her pretty lips, like a newly-opened bud, lifted for the caresses he always gave.

"You have come, you have come!" she cried with wild rapture. "Oh, how good! How good! And the leaves have scarcely begun to fall yet."

"Have you been watching them?" asked Cecil tenderly, as he lifted her in his arms and looked down at the lovely flushed face. "Well, and you are glad to see me. And have you been well?"

"Quite well," she said, laying her pretty fair-haired head down on his shoulder.

"And good and happy?" he questioned, seating himself on a rough wooden bench under a great chestnut tree close by.

"They say I am good," she answered, looking up into his face; "but happy—I always wanted you."

"It is good to have even one thing on earth to love one," murmured Cecil, stroking back the soft tresses of hair from the childish brow.

Her eyes were looking eagerly at his face. She put up one little hand and touched it gently.

"Have you been ill?" she asked, in her childish, broken French.

He roused himself from his momentary abstraction.

"Yes," he said quietly; "I have, dear. And I am going away—perhaps for a very long time. That is why I came to see you now; it may be many months before I can do so again, but I would not leave without saying 'Good-bye' to my little waif."

"Going away!" echoed the child.

Great tears gathered in her eyes; the pretty red lips quivered. Cecil saw the signs of emotion, and tried to hush them with tender words and promises. But it was no use. That one idea of his absence—his loss—alone filled the loving childish heart. He tried in vain to console her.

"Listen, dear," he said at last. "I have had a great trouble—a great sorrow. I cannot explain them to you, for you are too young to understand their meaning; but I have no home now, nor any friends—save one—and he cannot help me. I am obliged to go away from England and work. I will not forget you; that I promise, and whenever I can I will come and see you. Won't that content you? Do you love me so very much?"

She tried to stifle her sobs now, and clung to him the closer.

"Oh, yes, yes," she cried, with almost passionate fervour. "I have no one else to love but you, now 'Ita has gone. Oh, take me with you! do take me with you! I can't bear to be here."

Cecil listened, deeply moved. He was half inclined to grant her prayer—half inclined to take with him to his exile and loneliness the little frail life he had once rescued—to keep to himself the love that was so grateful and spontaneous a thing.

Afterwards—in years to come—he thought of this impulse, and marvelled whether his yielding to it, would not have shown a truer wisdom than its rejection.

After all, with all our boasted powers of prescience, experience, foresight—how blindly we walk along the great high-road of life!

At every turning—at every chance step, some trifling occurrence, some unimportant-looking decision may suffice to raise up a fabric of difficulties—troubles, dangers, woes—of which we never dream. If Chance, indeed, have no existence, and Fate be but a pagan doctrine, whence spring those strange and apparently unimportant events on whose very triviality rest future weal or woe—good or ill—misfortune or success. If human life is governed by laws independent of ourselves, and human will is but the subservience to an irresistible control, their lives in both no stranger thing than that very dominance of hazard, so-called Chance, which makes of apparent trifles the turning-point of a Future, the remorse of a Past, the blind content of a Present.

Cecil hesitated—wavered—then very gently put aside the entreaty. This perfect, unquestioning devotion was very sweet to him, but the life he had saved seemed to demand an unselfish consideration for its highest good, and with

such soothing, tender words as he could frame, he tried to explain this.

The child grew quiet beneath the power of those gentle words, but it pained him to see how pale and sad the little face became, and how mournfully the great grey eyes looked up to his.

"The sisters are very kind to you, are they not?" he asked at last.

"Oh yes; but it is always so sad—so quiet here," she answered. "When you come I feel so happy; but when you go it is just as if those great iron gates shut you out for ever, and I fear you will never come back."

"But I will. I have told you I shall never forget you."

"What is your name?" asked the child suddenly. "You have never told me that. I want your name to pray for you, and think of you by."

A sudden spasm of pain contracted Cecil's face. Her innocent words had opened afresh a wound that even time could scarcely heal.

"My name," he said kindly. "Call me Cecil, that is enough. Can you say it?"

"Cecil, Monsieur Cecil," she lisped, in her pretty, old-fashioned way. "Ah, yes. I can say it and remember it. What a pretty name! It is not French."

"No; English."

"And—and will you be *very* long away, this time?" she asked, nestling back into his arms again with strange content.

"Not longer than I can help—be sure of that, dear," he said gently, more moved than he cared to show by her touching tenderness.

He held her there while the soft hush of twilight fell around the convent walls, and one by one the stars came out in the azure heavens above—held her, and spoke with all the gentle loving words he could frame of her future and her life—the little life that seemed all the dearer to him now that his own had become so desolate—so banned by shame and suffering.

He had but newly risen from a bed of sickness—his heart sad and sore enough, and the only living things for which he held any tenderness or any regard were his friend Lord Danvers and his little waif. But neither of these knew his secret—the one he had avoided, the other could not have understood its meaning, though she fathomed his sorrow, and in her own childish fashion strove to give him comfort.

With the starlit radiance of the night about them, and the soft wind stirring the leaves of the chestnut tree and ruffling

the soft clusters of curls above her brow, the child was intensely happy. The voice she loved was on her ear, the face she loved bent down to her own, the strong kindly arms that had saved her life, were round her as she loved to feel them. Life and all its bliss was summed up in that short hour of restful tenderness.

There seemed nothing more for her to ask or desire.

Then at last, with a lingering caress, he put her down from his arms, and, taking her hand in his, walked with her to the convent door. There were great tears in her eyes as she moved along by his side, and her little heart was heavy with pain and sorrow.

"And you won't be very—very long?" she whispered brokenly, as he left her in the care of Mère Thérèse, and bade them both farewell.

"How she loves you," murmured the good Superior, gazing from the little pale tear-stained face to his own.

"No—not very long," he promised again, and then, with some parting injunctions respecting her to Mère Thérèse, he left the convent.

As the clang of the heavy door sounded in the stillness, the child shuddered from head to foot. Then she threw herself down on the floor with a piteous cry, and sobbed as if her little heart would break.

With the next day's noon another visitor appeared at the iron gates which had closed on Cecil Calverley, and whose echoes seemed to the child Félicé like the death-knell of all the happiness she knew.

They opened to admit the stately person of Père Jerome. At the conclusion of his interview with the Superior the little child was summoned to his presence. She surveyed him with great awe. He had come here with her preserver she knew—they had met him on the road thither, and he had directed Cecil to the convent.

The priest looked at her long and critically, asked her a few questions in his soft melodious voice, and then spoke of Cecil.

The instant rapture that gleamed in her face—the eagerness with which she questioned him of her preserver's welfare, were all noted, coolly and observantly by her interrogator. A strange smile played round his lips, the evil glitter came into his eyes as he listened to the innocent words that told how this little life was bound with golden links of purest love to that other he had cursed and hated. Then he dismissed the child, and turned again to the Superior.

"If at any time you receive a mandate from me desiring this child to be sent to another of our retreats, you will at once obey it," he said quietly.

"But, holy father," commenced the good mother, almost in tears at so unexpected a command.

He silenced her with a gesture of his hand. "You have nothing to do but—obey. Rest assured I shall amply satisfy Mr. Calverley as to reasons for my interference. I may know more about the child's parentage than he does, or—chooses to acknowledge. Besides, he is no fit person to be entrusted with the bodily or spiritual welfare of another. He has been long in rebellion against the anointed of God, and where persuasion and gentleness fail, harshness and coercion must be tried."

"The young man looked sadly altered," said the good woman pityingly. "Heretic though he be, my heart ached for him, father. He seems to have gone through much trouble and sorrow of late."

"He has felt the chastening rod," murmured the dulcet tones of the priest. "But he accepts it with a stubborn and rebellious spirit. I fear much that even sorrow will fail to subdue that proud heart of his. The Church loves not severity, nor exercises it save in extreme cases: it has been my painful duty to deal him some suffering, and he takes it in ill part."

The good mother sighed involuntarily. She was a simple-minded, unworldly woman, and knew little enough of the storms and sorrows of life beyond her convent walls. Her eyes looked wistfully at the impenetrable countenance before her—but a keener glance than hers could have read nothing there that Père Jerome did not choose to reveal. He came to her armed with an authority against which she could not rebel. She knew that, dearly as she loved the child, and tenderly as she thought of the frank-faced, gallant young Englishman who had placed her under her charge, yet she must give up the one and deceive the other at the bidding of this man before her. She stood there gazing at him with wistful bewilderment—her hands meekly folded—her lips a little tremulous as the words she longed to utter were kept back by some stronger sense of prudence, and the restraint of long habit.

It was heresy to care in ever so slight a degree for one who was a rebel to the Infallible Faith—whose soul was to all intents and purposes lost; but she knew herself guilty of such heresy, and promised to do penance for it after every compassionate thought.

Père Jerome stayed there that day, but he referred no

more to the child, though he sought her again, and drew from her innocent prattle just as much of her trust in and devotion to her young guardian as suited his purpose to know.

"No—I will not part them—yet;" he said to himself, pacing slowly to and fro the quiet convent walks in the summer dusk. "Not yet. Let the tie grow a little dearer—let the little life twine itself more closely round the one that is now so forlorn of love. The wrench will be felt more deeply then. Ah! It is a wise maxim that bids us wait; haste spoils so many things. But no haste shall spoil this scheme of mine. The sword shall not leave the scabbard till the victim is ready for the blow."

With which mild and Christian observation he ended his soliloquy, and left the convent grounds.

CHAPTER XI

The end is come of pleasant places,
The end of tender words and faces.

WITH the closing of the convent door, it seemed to Cecil that all of love and tenderness his life now knew was shut off also. He looked mechanically around the familiar beauty of the scene. He remembered with a shudder, as of physical pain, the day he had first come thither with his little waif in his arms. How free, how careless, how untroubled life had been then! What changes had swept over it in one short year's space!

He had but newly risen from a bed of sickness; he still felt ill and weak, but bodily pain seemed of small account beside the misery that had descended on his life.

The priest had not lied when he spoke of proofs. The letters had been in his mother's handwriting and addressed to her cousin—the lover from whom she had been forced in order to make the splendid alliance which had given her rank and wealth, and noble possessions and—endless woe. Only too plainly those passionate words spoke out the misery to which she had been consigned, and with it her regrets and her despair. She and her lover had met again in after years and all the old, wild, unforgotten love had leaped into life once more, and then commenced the struggle so terrible to each individual heart that wages it, so incomprehensible to the outside world—the old, time-worn, terrible conflict between duty and passion—between all that love craves, and all that honour denies.

The despairing words, the wild longings, the intense love, and yet the stern sense of some higher, purer feeling that kept all these in check, were written plainly enough for their meaning to be interpreted, and Cecil had interpreted them aright when he had said: "A fatal love—a moment's weakness—but no sin." With cold smile and cruel sneer the priest had listened to the passionate refutation, the indignant disbelief in those fatal letters from the son of the woman who had written them—listened as unmoved, to all appearance, as some dark towering rock on which the wild seas beat, round which the tempests roar—to no purpose.

"These are no proofs," Cecil had declared; and Père Jerome only bowed and said: "Your father thought them more than sufficient. She was his wife when she wrote those letters—when she met her old lover again. I think those facts speak for themselves. Do you wish to make a public scandal of what had better be kept in the family? Your father never believed you were his son—for years past."

"Since you poisoned his mind, you mean," interrupted Cecil passionately.

Père Jerome only met those wrathful eyes with tranquil lingering gaze. "Since I, unfortunately, found those fatal letters," he resumed—"your mother's and her cousin's! Women are so foolishly sentimental over love-affairs. They always *will* keep compromising evidence by them. Your mother, doubtless, intended to destroy those, but she died suddenly and I found them. If you need further proof, I can even furnish that. Lady Strathavon was staying in the South of France at the time she met her old lover again. They used to meet in secret. I have a witness to prove that at any moment you desire, Mr. Cecil."

"My God!" groaned Cecil, as he turned away to hide his face from that pitiless gaze. "Are you a fiend? Could you not have let matters rest? What harm had that dead woman ever done you? My father would never have believed anything against her. He loved her too well. As for you——"

"Exactly. You do well to pause there," said Père Jerome ironically. "Such a secret could not be kept in common justice. You have no right to your name, your position; your expectations are based on false and illegal grounds. If your brother chooses to keep this a secret, that is all you can expect from him. There will be no scandal, no exposure, that he has promised; but from henceforth you had best go your own way and sink your identity under another name and in another land. You have no right here, and your father has distinctly forbidden the property to pass

into your hands at any chance or hazard. Lord Strathavon will doubtless marry soon ; in any case, supposing the succession fail through him, your youngest brother Harcourt comes in. You are as completely passed over as if you had never existed."

The cold pitiless words, spoken with the rancour of all the priest's most bitter hatred, seemed only to reach Cecil dimly through the chaos of bewilderment and shame that enveloped him. He raised his face at last. Years of age could scarcely have changed it more than the events of the last few hours. He felt as if he stood on an abyss gazing blankly down at the dark and awful depths that yawned before his feet, and the sight turned him sick and giddy. His life seemed now but an absolute despair, and his torturer looked on with fiendish exultation, triumphing in a work that laid the whole future of his young life desolate at his words.

With some effort at self-restraint, some consciousness that this suffering was too sweet a triumph to his foe, Cecil drew himself up at last and turned his colourless face, set and stern with an immutable pride, towards that cold and merciless gaze.

"You have done your worst, there need no more be said between us," he said tranquilly. "You hated me—always. Well, you have your triumph now. Take care that when next we meet it will not be your turn to ask for the mercy you have denied me. Even your armour may not be invincible—always !"

He little knew how fatally true his words would prove in that future, now hidden from them both.

So Cecil took farewell of his boyhood's home, the home hallowed by memory, endeared by childish love, familiar by association, the home that he had loved better than either of his brothers did, and from which he saw himself banished and outcast for no fault, no sin of his own. He did not believe in the story he had heard ; he never for one moment credited that his mother's life had been less pure, less spotless than his passionate and most tender memories of her had always pictured it. She might have erred, been tempted, but *sinned*, that he would not believe ; and that he resolved to prove, let the difficulties be what they might. In his heart he registered a vow to clear her name from its imputed dishonour, to remove the stain from his own birthright, to hurl back this foul aspersion in the teeth of the man who uttered it, ere ever he again set foot in those proud halls from which he knew himself banished. The task might be long, laborious, nevertheless it should be

accomplished ; and kneeling there in the dim twilight before the portrait of the mother whose error had condemned him to this fate, he swore to accomplish it yet.

"*Tout vient à point, à qui sait attendre*," says the French proverb. Cecil Calverley remembered it now, and, so remembering it, he went forth from his childhood's home an exiled and a beggared man. The iron of suffering had entered into his soul ; the frank, careless, sunny nature had been seared and scorched in the fire of treachery and of pain. Time alone could show what would be the fruit of such teaching, what the result of such experience.

He walked on now with the last echo of the closing door still lingering on his ear, with the shine of the stars on the quiet woods, and the low sweet breath of rustling winds sweeping all the dewy scents of night through the summer air ; walked on with eyes that saw naught, ears that heeded naught, his heart aching and racked with the anguish of treachery and woe, the life that lay before him looking to his sight but a dreary penance, an endless desolation.

He to whom but one short year ago life had looked so sweet and joyous a thing—rich with content, bright with possibilities, undimmed by treachery, or sorrow, or shame—now felt crushed and aged as if by weight of years, conscious of no single joy or brightness in the future that stretched so darkly before him. All the familiar things of his life had passed from his keeping. Wealth, name, honour—to these he had been denied all just claim ; the woman he had loved so madly had given herself to another, had, even while she confessed her love for himself, been false at heart. He had thought the bitterness of death could not have been exceeded by that moment, but now a fresh misery had divorced him from all that had still been left as consolation.

No wonder he looked up at the calm softness of the late summer skies, the shine of the glittering starlight, and saw in them no beauty—in nature as in life, no charm.

When our own hearts are out of tune, what harmony of nature can find entrance there ? When our own souls are racked with anguish, is there any voice on earth that does not thrill them with fresh discord, or jar on them with positive pain ?

He passed on under the waving lights and shadows thrown across the white deserted road, the silver lustre of the stars above his head, the crushed leaves and blossoms lying beneath his feet. Bodily suffering had made him so weak that mental agony seemed to fall with stronger pressure, and fill his every pulse. Suddenly he turned aside with giddy swerving steps from the road that stretched before him. The

tension of his strength seemed giving way, a sudden dimness shut out all the glory of the summer night, and the black shadows whirled around his head in giddy circles. He stretched out his arms involuntarily and seized one of the low, drooping boughs to steady himself; then suddenly his hands relaxed their feeble grasp; he fell, face downwards, on the dew-steeped grasses, the moonlight bathing his stricken form, the soft rustle of the leaves alone stirring in the death-like silence.

He had been driven out to exile, and in that exile his life and his sufferings must alike be spent—alone.

CHAPTER XII

Days that are over,
Dreams that are done. -

SITUATED near Auteuil, nestled amongst the green woods, and with a view of the glittering spires of Paris in the hazy distance, was a charming villa residence, the property of the Count de Besançon, and here in the sultry heat of the late summer he came with his newly-wedded wife.

No schoolboy in his first love-dream was ever more hopelessly infatuated with the mistress he adored, than this courtly, cynical, high-bred man of the world had been by the dazzling beauty and thousand witcheries of Faustine. But he had never dreamt of paying a price so high for her possession, as he had been induced to do. Rivalry and jealousy had fanned the flame of his mad passion into one intense overmastering longing to succeed where all others had failed. He saw that Cecil Calverley was more favoured than any of the men who sued for her favour, and he knew that the chivalrous, ardent youth of the young lover would never stoop to wrong, or insult, the idol of his dreams. He had meant only to offer her the world when he sought her at Deauville, he ended by offering himself and his rank and honours. And even the magnitude of that offer had met with cold response.

Fearful of defeat, his passion growing yet wilder and more absorbing for every rebuff it met, the Count had still persisted—still persevered, the strange madness which had stolen upon his life, enthralling him more closely day by day, until the scandal he would arouse, the world he would amaze, were alike forgotten and disregarded. With all the ardour of an intense love, with all the temptings of ambition and of

power, of rank and honours that few would have placed it in her power to accept, he wooed this strange enchantress at whose power he had once mocked, and when hope was at its last ebb, when her scornful rejection still rang in his ears, and all the bitterness of revengeful passions was surging through his heart, he heard that his cause was won.

What had occasioned that sudden change—that hasty acceptance, he neither knew nor questioned. It was sufficient for him that he had won her, and all that the world might say looked but idle babble and indifferent gossip to him then.

They were wedded quietly and unostentatiously, and he believed her content and himself happy. That any woman could be dissatisfied with rank so brilliant, possessions so great, it never entered his head to doubt. And she appeared so to all intents and purposes; but she was very cold, and intensely proud; and all the honour and affluence and ease of her life were scarcely less bitter to her than the degradation with which that life had been accounted. The triumphs that lay before her, wearied ere yet they were tasted.

All that radiant, unstable, capricious, temperament which had held so great a charm for even this world-weary man, long satiated with life and its vanities, seemed altered now to a calm, passionless indifference that nothing roused, and nothing moved.

That such change could bring any bitterness of disappointment to her husband she never thought. He had always seemed to her a worldly, unscrupulous man—a man who bore a by no means spotless reputation. She had given herself to him in that moment of supreme and high-strung abnegation of self which had seemed to her the only way of saving Cecil Calverley from his fatal passion. And the act once committed, the sacrifice once made, a great loathing and disgust seemed to fall upon her and suffocate her with a memory of undying shame.

For her young, pure-souled, chivalrous lover she had deemed herself no fitting mate; but from this man, steeped in much sin, renowned for much evil, bargaining for her beauty as he would have done for the pictures on his walls or the horses in his stables, it had seemed no wrong to demand the uttermost payment. She was utterly indifferent—at times she almost abhorred him—but none the less would she be faithful unto death once her promise was given, none the less would she have scorned to carry shame to her husband's hearth, or fail in the smallest iota of that duty she had vowed.

To her the bargain seemed fair enough, for she had gauged the depth of the love offered, and knew its worth.

At times an unutterable repugnance and hatred of herself—of him—of life as it now was, swept over her soul and showed her the full extent of her own degradation, for to no woman with one spark of pure, true womanhood in her nature can a loveless marriage be aught but an endless shame; a mockery that no priestly blessing, no human laws can sanctify—a dishonour against which all that is best in her, revolts.

"It was for him—for him; in no other way could I save him," she told herself again and again, for she had known the extent of her own weakness, and she had dreaded to take advantage of that pure and chivalrous worship which had been once hers to do with as she would.

"He is so young, and he will forget, and some day he will thank me, even if he despise me now," she murmured, pacing to and fro among the aisles of roses in her villa gardens—pacing with steps slow and weary, and eyes dark with pain. "For me what does it matter? My youth is gone, my life is half over. Love is not for such as I, and the world will see I have but cared to repay its scorn; but *he*——"

A great softness came over the beautiful face, her heart leaped like a bound captive set free, all the sweetness and joy her life had ever known were centered in the memory represented by that word. A moment and the softness passed, the light died out from her face, it looked cold and calm and passionless as of late it alone had looked: she heard her husband's step. She knew that even the luxury of solitude was denied her now.

He came towards her rapidly; she made no effort to meet him; only stood and waited. Passive acquiescence, that was her life now—the life she had chosen, whether wisely or erroneously who should say?

"I have been searching for you everywhere, *ma belle*," he said eagerly. "I did not know you had left the house."

"It was so warm indoors," she answered indifferently.

"Do you like this place?" he said, moving along by her side as she passed through the aisles of summer blossoms. "Would you rather go to the sea?"

Her eyes followed the silver gleam of the winding Seine shining far off through the trees. "The sea," she said, with a sudden shiver, "oh no, I do not wish to go there."

She remembered those bright brief days—those summer mornings by the salt waters of the Channel as it swept the sands of Deauville. Could she ever look on it again and not feel sick at heart and despairing as she felt now?

"How changed you are!" he said moodily, watching the shadows on her face. "Are you not happy? Is there anything I can do—more——"

He paused abruptly; a sudden fear swept over him. "Is it one of your old lovers you regret?" he said mockingly. "That fair-faced English boy, perhaps, who was always dangling after you. *Ma chère*, I gave you credit for better taste."

"Have I not shown it?" she answered in those measured tranquil tones that always angered him. "I married *you*."

"*Par Dieu*, how you say that!" he laughed bitterly. "Yes, you did, and I suppose you had your own reasons. I did not think you were a cold woman, *ma belle*; but assuredly you have shown yourself ice itself to me, despite the honour you have done me of becoming my wife. Are you not afraid of wearying me? Our *lune de miel* is hardly over, and I have not heard one word of tenderness from those beautiful lips yet. I might have bought many at a less cost."

"How about their sincerity?" she asked scornfully. "I never professed to love you—that you know, and you told me——"

"*Nom de Dieu!* I told you—yes, what we all tell in our moments of infatuation. But it is not pleasant to woo a statue, and, like the world at large, *belle reine*, I have never credited you with being—that!"

A scarlet flush dyed the beautiful face. "You, at least, should not insult me," she said contemptuously. "You knew the truth, and told me you believed it."

"I would have told you anything—then," he said, and turned and looked at her with bold and burning eyes that sank beneath the fearless dignity of her own. "I would tell you anything now," he murmured, drawing her hand within his arm, and bending down to the lovely haughty face, "so only you would say—you love me."

A sudden pallor swept the rose flush from her cheeks; he felt the quick shudder of her frame as she drew suddenly aside.

"I never deceived you on that point—I never shall," she said coldly. "Love! it is a folly, a weakness, a thing apart from my life. Rest assured I shall be true to you, but I am no romantic girl with her heart full of dreams and idyls. I have seen too much of the world and of—men—for that!"

"And I love you so," he muttered involuntarily, looking at the lovely passionless face so coldly averted. "I will give you all you wish. I will bend even the world's indifference, and you shall reign as high as any of those who once scorned you. Can you not at least try to show me some tenderness for all I have for you?"

"You are very generous, I know," she answered, looking wearily at his eager, ardent face. "I suppose I am unlike

most women. I do not know. There is so much bitterness in my heart, and I care very little, I think, for anything in the world. It is my loss, doubtless; but you knew me well enough."

"Yes, you treated all men alike; I must say that," he answered moodily. "But you cared for me enough to marry me. You said so."

"Yes; enough for that," she said with an odd little hard smile.

"And I can wait and hope for more?" he added. "At least, there is no other who is anything to you, save myself?"

"Save yourself," she echoed in the same odd mocking voice. "Surely that might content you."

"It must, until my devotion wins some warmer recompense," he said. "We have had enough of solitude, though. I have no wish to quarrel yet, but you try me very often. We will go into the world again."

"As you will," she answered wearily, and looked once more over to the shining waters and the far-off glittering spires. The world, or any place in the world—what could they be to her now?

Life looked only a colourless, dreary blank, and all of joy her life could henceforth know was centered in one memory whose sweetness was forbidden, whose every thought was a disloyalty.

This strange, hot, restless, unsought love was only an added bitterness to the lot she had chosen. It had not troubled her much at the time of her decision; but now she thought, with a pang, of all it had a right to exact, and all that it was neither in her power nor her will to give. She had often dealt with men's follies, weaknesses, passions, enmities, despair, but then her life had been free. She shuddered at the thought of her voluntary bondage, and her helplessness to avoid its demands.

A servant approached from the house as she stood there lost in thought.

Her husband had left her, and was disappearing down one of the shady walks of the villa grounds.

"A gentleman to see madame," the man said, handing a card.

She took it and glanced at the name. Her cheek paled, her eyes grew troubled. "Say I am coming," she said briefly, and turned and moved with tranquil, languid grace back through the rose aisles and over the smooth greensward of the terrace. Her lips closed tightly together, her hand crushed the little bit of harmless pasteboard she held. On it was written the name of "Père Jerome!"

"Ah, my daughter, it is long since we met!"

The pleasant voice, the serene smile seemed to sicken and terrify the woman, who bent her graceful head before the speaker.

"I am glad you took my advice," he continued presently, motioning her to a seat as though he were master of the house and she his visitor. "You have made a brilliant marriage. I need not ask if you are also happy."

"No, the facts speak for themselves, holy father," she said ironically. "Yes, I did your bidding, of course. Have you come to see how I grace my new sphere?"

"A woman like yourself would grace any sphere," he said with urbane courtesy. "No, I have not come for that. I wish to hear how far matters went between you and Mr. Calverley. Your letters were scarcely as clear upon that point as I should have wished."

A flush of anger swept over the beautiful face. "I told you all there was to tell," she said haughtily.

"That he loved you, yes; that he would have wedded you—no. Why was that concealed?"

"I deemed it but the freak of a moment, the force of a headstrong unreasoning passion. A boy like Cecil Calverley could scarcely know his own mind on such a subject as marriage."

The priest bent his head with a slight smile. "A boy," he murmured; "scarcely that, my daughter, even in your eyes, I think. But perhaps your motives were magnanimous, or you feared the anger of his family. As circumstances have turned out, neither could have affected you. Mr. Cecil is only an alien branch of the Strathavon family. They have refused to acknowledge his legitimacy."

"What?"

She had sprung to her feet, her face deadly pale, her eyes wide and agonised in their wonder and dread.

"You are astonished, no doubt," resumed the priest tranquilly. "Nevertheless, it is true. The matter will be kept in the family, of course. The world at large will not know why one of the members has disappeared—never to be heard of any more—his name unknown henceforward, his rights denied, his hands and brains alone his hostages to fortune. A sad fate, a hard fate, maybe; but nevertheless one he must bear. I tell you this, madame, in strict confidence, not that it can in any way concern you."

"Concern me! Oh, my God!"

The broken cry pealed out on the silence—an involuntary utterance of all the pent-up agony within that throbbing heart. So her sacrifice was of no avail—had never been

needed! She had thought to save him from shame, from suffering, from the mockery of the world; and now she saw him, banned, dishonoured, exiled, and alone.

A darkness as of night seemed to sweep over her. She saw nothing, heard nothing, only the quick hard throbs of her aching heart, only the echo of those fatal words that had overthrown her hard-won peace.

"Tell me," she cried at last, her voice breaking through the mists of suffering that seemed stifling sense and reason, "tell me one thing. Did you know this when you bade me refuse his love—when you pointed out the wrong I might do to him?"

"Yes; I knew it."

His calm eyes met her agonised gaze; his cold and passionless face never altered its expression; yet he knew only too well the suffering he dealt, the treachery that had laid two lives desolate at his will.

Slowly, wearily, with an unutterable reproach, the woman's eyes looked back to his. His will she could not combat, his commands she was bound to obey; but for a moment that sad and pathetic gaze smote him with a faint sense of shame, an instant's vain regret. Then the feeling passed. His usual composure returned. He went on speaking as tranquilly as if each word were not a dagger-thrust in the heart of the woman who heard them.

"Of course I knew it. But what of that? It could have made no difference."

"No difference!"

The cry broke from her despite herself, and the blood flushed back to the white and weary face. She thought of all the difference such knowledge would have made; of how in exile, and in sorrow, and in need, she would have but clung the closer, and loved the better. She had thought to serve him, and she had only dealt him pain, and given to her own life an endless despair beside which the passive endurance of the past month looked almost happiness. She had cut herself asunder from his life, deeming it too pure and honourable a one to share; and lo, that life was branded with a living shame—more desolate even than her own!

"No difference!" She could have laughed aloud as she heard, and looked on the face of the man who had cursed her life, and that other life whose love she had been forbidden to accept.

She heard the priest's voice sounding on and on, but all his words were as meaningless as an unknown tongue to her now. She gave no heed—no sign. A grey, heavy shadow seemed to have fallen over the brilliance of her beauty.

White, and still as a statue, she stood there and listened, while all the reddened glow of the sunlight fell through the open casements, and shone on the splendour and luxury of her new home. Her home—and he was desolate—friendless—alone!

It was the very irony of Fate—the fate she had chosen that he at least might be spared. All the strength and patience and hope of life seemed to die and drop off from her there as flame drops to the ground, leaving only the grey cold ashes of a great despair.

The priest's voice ceased. He looked at her, moved to something that was almost pity, for his own work—ashamed even in the moment of his own victory; but the weakness passed as rapidly as it came. He rose and stood before her.

"My news has surprised and grieved you, I see. I will not intrude my presence any longer. You know, my daughter, where true happiness and peace are alone to be found. Seek them as of old, and rest assured that on any sacrifice you have made, any commands you have fulfilled, the blessing of Heaven will most surely rest."

She raised her eyes then and looked him full in the face.

"Say rather the curse of hell," she thought in her heart, but her lips were silent—sealed in an eternal obedience, a tyrannical restraint at which she dared not rebel.

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

"BY THE WORLD FORGOT"

"The ghosts of words and dusty dreams."

In one of the narrowest, poorest, dingiest streets of Bologna, lived Già's acquaintance, the old musician, Marco Rosa.

He had but one room—a dark, dingy, cheerless place; he was wretchedly poor, he was very shabby and very ugly, half-starved, and universally despised; he earned a scanty livelihood by playing in the orchestra at one of the minor theatres, and for the rest was utterly alone and utterly forgotten.

In his youth he had dreamed of fame and success; he had spent his hours and days, his heart and life, on Art; he had created music of wonderful beauty and devoted himself solely

and entirely to its study, but his struggles had brought him no reward, and his devotion no remembrance.

It may have been the fault of circumstance, or the want of opportunity, for, being timid and meek of disposition, he had not known when to force the one, or seize the other ; and in the world the highest and purest genius ever created can do little for a man who neglects these ministers to success—at least, so long as he lives. So it had chanced that Rosa in his profession had never risen to be of much note, being easily kept down and pushed aside by those bolder and stronger than himself, and who, though without a thousandth part of his talent, possessed none of his shrinking and timidity. There are some to whom it seems desecration to trumpet their doings and their efforts in the worship of a mistress so divine and so unapproachably perfect as Art, and there are others again who blare and bray and din into the ears of men their own mighty achievements, until for very weariness of their noise and importunity, they grant them their desires.

The fame that the one reaches comes slowly, and often when the eyes are closed and the ears are deaf to it, but yet it is worth a hundredfold more than the evanescent puff of popularity that the world's mouth breathes, but of which the heart and memory of men keep no record.

If Marco Rosa ever attained fame it would be of the former kind, when life had done its worst and death had set its kindly seal upon endless self-denial and cruel hardships. Then perchance some kindly eye might discover his long-hidden treasures and read for itself their worth, and unfold a mine of melody to the world of which it had never dreamed, and so reward dead genius by late-come appreciation.

It is often so. But who shall change the world, or blame it that it forces genius to interpret other men's creations for a bare livelihood, and refuses to hear those it creates itself ?

Marco was an admirable teacher. Strict, because he would allow of nothing weak, or faulty, or imperfect to be put forward in the service of the music he worshipped ; tender, because of his own humility and gentleness, that always placed before him an ideal he could never reach, and an excellence he could never approach ; painstaking and patient, giving infinite labour for small gain just from the love of what he taught, and simple devotion to the great art that had so ill-repaid his life-long service.

Già had kept his word—why was only known to himself—and sent the child Quità to him from time to time. He had other children besides her to teach, some of whom he trained for the church choir, and some whom he taught for sheer

love of teaching and training a gift he had chanced to discover in them.

To Quità these lessons were hours of unmixed joy. Other children might deem it an arduous and laborious task to stand in a circle and sing scales hour by hour, while the stifling heat of summer burned on the high roofs and flashed through the narrow window; or when that little square den of their master's had no fire in its stove, and the bitter cold of winter numbed their limbs and chilled their feet; but to Quità there was neither hardship nor toil.

Fresh from the lash of her taskmaster, the oaths and cruel jests and mocking words that rained on her ear incessantly, it was like a glimpse of paradise to enter this dreary, dusky chamber, where floods of melody were poured out from children's voices, where often their master himself, touched by some unusual excellence in their performance, would play to them, after the lesson was over, such music as awed their souls with wonder, and filled their eyes with tears.

Of all his pupils, Quità was his favourite. It may have been because, like himself, she was gifted with a subtle and instinctive genius for the art he loved.

She was born with a sure and perfect ear for melody. An incorrect note or a false phrase would torture her as it did her master himself; and, child though she was, her voice was lovely, and with daily practice and training, grew even more wonderful. The old man grew to love her as he had never loved living thing. He not only taught her singing but also to read and write, and to play on his own instrument—the old time-worn Cremona violin, that was to him as a friend in his loneliness, and a companion to his life.

Her regard for him was simply adoration. To be praised and loved and kindly treated was a thing so new and strange; and the older she grew the deeper grew also her reverence, and the more intense her love.

There were other things she learnt from him besides Art. He taught her that a woman's fairest gifts are a stainless purity and a perfect truth.

"Come what may," he would say, "never soil your lips with a lie or your heart with an impure thought. The poorest and the hardest life may still be virtuous, the subtlest temptations of life cannot assail a soul that is pure, a mind that is noble. God will give you both if you ask Him, though the devil will strive all your life long to rob you of them."

"Why?" she asked, wondering.

"Because you will be a woman: it is the one thing for which I pity you. A man's genius in a girl's frail body. Of what use will it be once you learn your power?"

"What is a woman's power?"

He smiled bitterly.

"What? To drive men to the devil, most of all; sometimes—but rarely that—to minister to them as God's angels might to Him——"

"I will do that," she said softly below her breath, "if Heaven gives me strength."

The old man looked at the slender, childish figure, with the soft serious eyes upraised, and the small clasped hands entwined—so frail, so weak, so young she looked, that a great pity swept through his heart.

"Ay! pray that Heaven may," he said solemnly. "You will need it in the future mapped out for you, if ever woman did!"

"Can I ever leave Già—do you think?" she asked him later on that evening when her task was done, and she laid down pen and paper, and rose to go home.

The old man glanced at her in surprise.

"Why do you ask?"

"It is so hard to be always beaten, and—I am not his child."

"True, but you are safely in his clutches. I fear to get out of them is a harder task than you can ever manage. Does he still treat you so cruelly?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "I am very unhappy there—always."

He stretched out his hand and drew her towards him—her little ragged cloak fell off and showed him the marks of cruel stripes on her shoulders, and white slender arms.

"It is cruel—shameful!" he muttered angrily. "One would hardly treat a brute so. I will speak to him, child, and see what I can do. I at least can appeal to his selfishness by telling him if he defaces your beauty now, it will be so much less in his pocket hereafter. It seems base to say it, but it may save you some stripes."

"Are you coming with me—now?" she asked gladly.

"But there is your score, only half finished."

"It can wait," he said quietly. "The world is in no such haste for my works that I need neglect duty or charity to attend to them. Come!"

Hand-in-hand they passed out into the cold dark streets, filled now with ink-black shadows.

The child held her breath and looked with awe around her. It had always had something of fear for her—this old Italian city with its gloomy architecture, its dark high walls, its vaulted footways, and endless arches, and great labyrinths of antique stone and marble.

For five years she had lived with Già in his miserable house, which was set far beyond the city gates, out on the beautiful green hillside, from whence one could look down on the dusky old-world city below, and across great plains that stretched away like an emerald ocean till the distance wrapped them in hazy mist. For five years she had been beaten and tortured, and had fared hardly and sparingly, for Già was idle and never worked, and his wife had more than her weak strength could manage, with hoeing, and ploughing, and tending her poultry, and washing linen, and carrying her garden produce to the market in the city. The other children lied, and stole, and fought, and quarrelled with each other, and took their stripes with loud outcries, and did their tasks with little care; but Quità was always patient and gentle, asking neither for food, nor pity, nor remission of her labours, taking punishment with dauntless courage, even when tortured by the shy shame, and fugitive shrinking, inherent in her nature.

Già hated her always. He hated her in that she was so unlike his other helpless slaves; it gratified his sharp cruel temper to torture and ill-use her, even though he could wring no word of complaint from the patient childish lips, even though he had seen her drop scores and scores of times from sheer exhaustion at the tasks he set, and the treatment he gave.

If it had not been for the old musician, and all he had taught her, the child would have grown up ignorant as the dumb brutes around her; but Già knew nothing of what she learnt with him, save that her voice grew daily more beautiful, until he in his own mind became doubtful as to whether she would bring him most money as a dancer, or a singer.

He would have had her mind a blank, if possible, to make her more helpless in her slavery, more utterly dependent on his mercy; but though he had done his best to brutalise and degrade her she had ever escaped him, for her mind was full of thoughts and dreams unfathomable, and she had a soul gifted with a nobility too pure and a faith too perfect for his influence to reach or degrade.

As she passed now through the dim-lit streets of the old Italian city, her hand clasped in that of her old faithful friend, she forgot her troubles, all her hard cruel life, all her bitter hardships.

The hollow echo of the stones beneath her feet, the vista of endless arches, the height of the gloomy walls, the strange impenetrable stillness breathing throughout the hushed darkness of the winter night, all these held her with the old strange

sense of awe that had come to her when first she saw them.

A spell as of old-world enchantment seems ever to hold these ancient cities of the sunny south—cities which have seen so much, and are full of traditions, and hold the living beauty of dead arts and the dreams of dead men so closely, that all the folly and frivolity of modern life can never obliterate their memory, even though it dwell in their midst.

Old Marco knew every tradition and every history of Bologna, as one born there, and, loving it, cannot help but know.

He had told the little wondering child beside him of sack and siege, of fire and fury, of the grand old University which had once seen scholars of all ages and all countries troop to its walls, of the genius that had immortalised its marbles, of the sad fate of the young gifted Prosperzia de Rossi, whom Bologna had once worshipped as a saint and a sovereign, and whose chisel had won fame even in days when Michael Angelo had triumphed; of all the beauty and the sadness, the shames and sorrows, the lives and deaths of men and women once crowned with the world's praises, now deaf alike to its remembrance, or regret. All these things he had told her, and she had listened wondering and awe-struck, yet feeding mind and soul upon all the noble truths and deeds of heroism, and sad dead dreams, and giant efforts, of which she heard.

It was a strange education, but a noble one, for in all she learnt she saw that heroism and suffering and endurance went hand in hand, and in her childish mind grew up resolves as firm, patience as great, endurance as heroic.

"I wish I could keep you with me always, child," said the old musician sadly, as they went out of the city gates and into the dark silent country beyond.

She looked up at him with sudden rapture shining in her eyes, "Oh! if you *could*!"

He shook his head regretfully. "I am so old and so poor—not but that I would willingly share all I have with you to the last *scudo*. But Già is not a man to be turned from his purpose readily."

"He says I am to be a dancer at the theatres when I am old enough; four more years, that is all. There is a girl at Milan now whom he trained, and who brings him much money. She came to see him once, and when I asked her what the life was like she laughed, and said, 'Paradise, after what it had been,' that she was *fêted*, and honoured, and made

much of by the great nobles, and had jewels and fine clothes, and a lovely house to live in, and never anyone to say her nay, be her caprices ever so many, or her whims ever so costly !”

“That is like enough,” said the old man. “Yet, what a life to condemn one to, who is young and innocent, and—a woman ! Oh, child ! what will your future be in the years to come ?”

She looked wistfully up at the troubled face beside her.

“Harder than it is now—do you think ?” she asked.

“Harder, no ; but the ease and the luxury and the peace can only be won at a price more terrible than any bodily hardship—than any cruelty or brutality you endure now. You do not understand—yet ? No. But you will soon. Ah, you will soon.”

And he sighed deeply, and clasped the little soft fingers more closely in his withered palm.

“If you were but a boy,” he said, regretfully.

“You say that so often,” murmured the child. “Is it so much better ?”

“In the years to come, when you will have to suffer and smile, though your heart be breaking, to dread men’s love, as the peach dreads the wasp’s kiss, which leaves corruption in its core ; to see your genius despised because it breathes through a thing so frail and weak ; to know your own powers and your own possibilities, yet see them bring you no favour or reward, save through channels where gold runs in streams of black dishonour ; to know that your beauty on the world’s stage, is a jest and a mockery, and a shame, if you withhold it or not from men’s purchase ; to know all this and feel it to your heart’s core, till your life dies for very wretchedness. That is the fate of women for whom the cruelty of circumstance has shaped such a future as Già has shaped for you.”

She turned pale and trembled.

“I cannot understand,” she said softly and timidly. “It seems terrible. Is there no escape ?”

“I would to God there were !” he cried with sudden passion. “How came you into Già’s power first ?”

“I do not know,” she answered wearily. “I remember, like a dream, some other life, when kind faces smiled on me and kind voices spoke to me, and then—a blank.”

“And afterwards ?”

“It was always—Già.”

“Poor child—poor child ! If I could only help you.” But I am poor, friendless, and an outcast—in no way better than yourself, save that I owe dependence to none.”

She had listened eagerly, but now her head drooped, and

her face grew sad with those shadows that are so terrible to see on a face that is childish, and innocent, and fair.

"Life is very cruel," resumed the old man wearily. "Why do we live at all when existence is only a burden? The law of creation is at once so terrible and so sad. We are born—not of our own will; we breathe, suffer, die; the dust of death is the breath of life, so we are told. Some enjoy it—prize it—glory in it. Others—and by far the greater part of humanity, these only groan under its burden, and sigh for its release. Truly God's ways are strange.

"Has your life been hard always?" the child asked presently. "You talk of it so sadly."

Her eyes rested on him as she asked the question, seeing only a dreary grey shrunken figure, old and sad, and poor, with a face where care had sown many lines, and eyes that held bitter truths and weary memories.

"Always," he answered her with a sigh. "Misfortune and I are long friends. I have groped through life blindly. I have dreamed of greatness and woke to a garret and a crust. It is the lot of many men. Why not?"

"But some are great and successful," she said timidly.

"True. I was not. It may be my own fault; I cannot tell. I loved Art and not the world. One cannot serve two masters, you know."

"But your music is so beautiful—if it was only heard!"

He smiled—a patient, weary smile.

"The world did not want to hear it when I was young and prayed for its favour. I am old now, and a beggar. It cares to listen still less."

The child was silent. Her mind could not always follow his through its labyrinth of thought; the cynicism, and weariness, and contempt with which he spoke of life and its mysteries, pained and perplexed her often.

"I thought once that to be great and famous, to have one's name on men's lips, to be honoured in men's sight, to see the melodies one had created and loved, lifted up from silence and fitted to the praise of multitudes and the wonder of cities—that this was the purest, sweetest, holiest joy life could hold, or the heart desire. But I was young then; I am old now, and I have seen the folly, and vanity, and worthlessness of all things—of human desire and human passion, of genius that fails to seduce opportunity, of gifts that fail to control circumstance, of the riches that are vanity to the holder and must be left at death's bidding, of the love that is a dream with a bitter awakening. Ah, child, there is little to remember and less to regret when one is poor, and alone, and—threescore."

The child moved swiftly along beside him, silent and half afraid of a sorrow she could not touch, and a loneliness she could not fathom. Her eyes grew tearful ; her lips sighed not for her own life that was still scarce begun, but for his that was so nearly ended. To her he seemed a hero and a martyr all in one. She marvelled that he should ever care to pity, or remember her ; yet in her simple childish way she thanked God that He had sent her one living creature to whom she could speak without fear, and who showed her such pity and such tenderness as alone kept life in the little starved, lonely heart, that was so unspeakably desolate.

Thus in silence and in thought they mounted the steep hillside, and passed into Già's house.

CHAPTER II

GIA

All the oppression that is done under the sun

" WHERE have you stayed so late ? "

It was Già's voice—rough, and harsh, and taunting—that greeted Quità's entrance.

" Nay, do not scold the child. I came home with her, and my steps are slow ; we were long on the road," interrupted Marco Rosa gently, as he felt the little hand tremble in his own.

" You came home with her," said the man with a rude laugh. " Is the little beggar too fine to walk by herself after nightfall ? Stuff her head with much more folly and fancy, Marco, and she goes to you no more. What I say, I mean. Now go, get a meal—there are bread and beans within ; and then to bed with you ! "

He motioned the child from the room with a fierce gesture that would have been a blow had Marco not been there ; but the blustering wretch was a coward at heart, and did not care to ill-use the little creature before anyone else.

" You give scant welcome, Già," said the old musician, as he seated himself by the fire and rubbed his numb and withered hands together for warmth.

" I never waste words," was the curt response. " What do you want with me to-night ? "

" What are you going to do with the child ? She is growing up fast."

" So—blows the wind that way ? Have you an eye to the profits of your nightingale's music, then ? "

"Nay, Già," said the other, letting the taunt pass by unnoticed. "I think she is clever—gifted, indeed, beyond her age and sex. It seems hard to condemn her to the life of a dumb brute, or a wirestrung puppet. You have plenty other children to make dancers of—why force this girl to become one too?"

"Because I choose," muttered Già with a fierce oath. "And because I won't be dictated to by you, or any living being. What is it to you what I do with the child? She is mine. Mine only—body and soul, and she shall know it too in the future as in the past!"

"It were wiser to treat her well, then," said the old man, still curbing his wrath and restraining angry words for the child's sake. "Bethink you, Già, slaves rebel sometimes—worms turn on the foot that treads them into the dust. One day she may escape you!"

"It will be the last day of her life when she does," swore Già under his breath.

"Who is she? Not a peasant's child, nor of this land surely?"

"Mind your own affairs, friend Marco," shouted the man angrily. "Meddle with me and the child at your peril. You are teaching her too much as it is. What think you do I care that she sings like a nightingale or plays like St. Cecilia herself?"

A gleam of defiance shot from the old man's eyes.

"You may not. The world will. I tell you the girl has genius that will give her more than woman's greatness. Would you destroy it as a weed flung on a dunghill to rot?"

"Ay—that I would if it took her from my power, or made her less a beast of burden than she is."

"May Heaven forgive you, Già!" said the old man, rising and confronting him in the deepening gloom. "It is a terrible thing to have a young fair life in your power, and to turn it to ruin and destruction. Yet one word before I go. If you beat and ill-use the child as you are doing, you will weaken her body and destroy her beauty. It is to your own advantage that you treat her well. She is as pliant as a reed now, but a day may come when the reed will snap asunder in your very hands, and then—what have you?"

In his glance there was an unconscious appeal, a vague prayer for softer word or promise, but it was in vain.

The man set his teeth tighter, and looked at him in grim glee.

"I will answer you presently," he said, and strode to the door of the inner room and called to the child as she sat munching her dry crusts, and bade her come to him with an oath that was fiercer and wickedder than of yore.

The child trembled and obeyed. She stood before him—a little, weak, helpless thing, with a sorrowful appeal in her great dark eyes, and a mute courage in the firm closed lips.

"Little brute!" said the man ferociously, "what lies you have told of me to this old brain-sick fool I know not. Nevertheless it is but fair he should see your chastisement and learn how I brook interference, or rebellion. Strip!"

"Not so—not so. Oh, Già, for the love of all the saints be merciful!" cried the old man in a passion of horror and remorse.

"Silence, fool!" thundered the other; while the child, pale as death, gave no glance or word of appeal, but shook off the coarse linen folds from her delicate shoulders, and stood in her white and perfect loveliness before him, like a statue of marble.

Già seized a thick rope from a nail on the wall. His arm was raised. The scourge whistled through the air, curling adderlike in fierce descent.

Yet, ere it could fall, his arm was seized as in a vice; he was raised like a feather in arms to which passion and shame and fiery indignation had for a moment lent the long-past strength of youth, and hurled against the wall, where his head struck with a crash like a felled log! He lay there prostrate, senseless—stunned.

"Come, child—come!"

The child heard the voice, and started from her lethargy of fear. The room was very dark, only a fitful gleam from the logs smouldering on the hearth, lit it at intervals.

The old man breathed heavily. The sound of the wind outside as it swept from the mountain heights surged dully on his ears; his pulses beat like hammers. He could not tell whether he had dealt death or no in that moment of unmanageable fury, of superhuman strength. He did not care either at that moment. He only seized the child's hand and hurried her away with him into the dark bitter night, as if a troop of furies were unleashed behind him.

She was quite silent. She hurried along beside him, half fearful and half glad. She was leaving Già, that was all she thought. Perhaps Marco would protect her, keep her with him henceforward.

"May I stop with you always now?" she asked him timidly, as they entered his dwelling at last.

He looked at her with a smile more weary and more sad than tears.

"If it lies in man's power to keep you—yes."

"What are you doing?" she asked presently, as she watched him move to and fro, collecting his few possessions

and some treasured mss. that he packed in a bundle together.

"We must leave here at once," he said with a glance half sad, half regretful at the old bare walls and desolate dreariness of his chamber.

"Where shall we go?" she asked, wondering yet delighted at the thought of travel.

"To Rome. I have a friend there. You will be safe, I think; as for me——"

"What?" she questioned, as he hesitated.

"It matters little," he answered, "whether I die by the hand of justice, or the palsy of age; a few years more or less, what are they? But I would have you safe."

At nightfall next day a man, aged and bent, and a little peasant-boy with a pale, wistful, wondering face and short bright curls, entered the gates of Rome.

They were not molested. In the dark, lowering, windy weather they trod the half-deserted street, and flitted by huge columns and broken arches, by white gleams of ruined statues, and down crooked, noisome streets, where any crime might have been wrought under cover of the brooding shadows.

The two figures flitted ghostlike through the darkness, and came at last to a door from whence a faint stream of light issued.

The man paused and knocked. A few hurried words ensued between the person who opened it, and himself.

Then he and the little pale-faced lad passed in, and the door was closed on the gloom and silence of the night without.

CHAPTER III

Let the world abandon you,
But to yourself be true.

RUINED and deceived!

With those two words as the keynote on which to found the new harmonies of a new life, Cecil Calverley awoke as one from a dream. He had had no comprehension of calamity until, with the suddenness of a sirocco's blast, it had swept across his life and left all desolate and bare behind it.

Then a sudden hatred of his kind, of the world, of himself had followed; all that was left to him was the consciousness

of misery, the strength of endurance. At first the one thought in his mind had been to clear his mother's name and his own from the foul aspersion cast upon them, to insist on a recognition of his own rights, and to take his place once more among those of his family and race who had turned so coldly away from his passionate entreaties. But as bodily weakness and physical prostration stole over his frame these feelings died out; a great despair, an utter hopelessness took their place. Of what avail, of what benefit to do this now? His father had gone out of the world believing in this accusation, his last wishes a stringent command to bar him from all rights of inheritance. Nothing could alter these facts, nothing clear up the mystery between dead and living.

He was almost penniless now, for he had refused to accept a farthing of his brother's wealth, or be indebted to him for a single favour. The work he had resolved on demanded a large amount of time, of patience, and money, and meanwhile he had to live and for the first time find out that such a thing as actual want might stare him in the face in practical demonstration of the foolishness of pride, and the necessity for means to preserve life, now when that life looked least endurable.

Sometimes he longed for death, since in life he saw no ray of hope, no gleam of sunshine, where once both had streamed in prodigal radiance. Physical misery, mental stupor oppressed his brain, and left no clear space for thought. What to do, where to go he scarcely knew, only the consciousness that something must be thought out and decided upon came upon him from time to time.

The simple-minded peasants who had found him lying prostrate and exhausted among the woods in the early dawn of the autumn day, and taken him to their homely dwelling, deemed that his brain was wandering, and, while they ministered to his needs and gave him shelter, pitied him with an intense pity, as one who must be only *fou* for the rest of his days. It was several weeks before he recovered strength and memory once more; and then looking back on that past from which the gulf of half a lifetime seemed to sever him, he tried to brace up his fallen energies and think out some plan for the future that lay before his thankless feet.

When he at last rose and found strength enough to leave those who had befriended him in his helplessness and need, he found he had but very little money left. He knew he could have applied to Vere Danvers, and his friend's generous heart would have placed unlimited wealth at his command; but he shrank from speaking, even to one he

loved and trusted, of the dishonour that had fallen on his life, the bitterness that would henceforth be his portion.

The world looked very empty and desolate to him as he opened his eyes on it once more, and felt the fever mists clear off from his brain, and the necessities of existence sound their imperative claims. Some words he had spoken to Lord Danvers in one of their jesting good-humoured controversies came back to his memory as he stood erect in the cottage door and gazed on the saddened glory of the autumn woods. "Despair is a greater master than Content; it is through suffering alone that Art has taught its grandest lessons." As he thought of those words something within him seemed to stir and waken from a long lethargy; the birth of a noble ambition, a brave endurance, was signalled by the remembrance. He knew that what *had* been was over and done with, but the future still stretched before him, and in the future was hope. A feeble hope maybe, a dim, fleeting, shadowy thing, but nevertheless enough now to waken in him the dreams of his youth, the desires he had deemed dead and stifled by the iron hands of misery.

Above the fret and fever of life, the wretchedness of abasement, a light seemed to break at last—a light pure and radiant as that of the new-born day on which he gazed. It was that mysterious something which adversity cannot kill, which suffering cannot destroy, that longing of the soul to triumph, that craving of the mind to achieve, that subtle force of genius dominant within the tortured frame, which summons life to labour even in its hours of darkest pain, and is salvation to that life when the paralysis of an infinite despair threatens to annihilate all that is best and noblest in its nature. Such a feeling was Cecil Calverley's salvation now.

It braced his energies and stirred a fresher pulse of feeling within his heart. A greater inheritance than any he had lost, still remained. Liberty and intellect were in his keeping, and pointed onwards to a goal that might be reached, a triumph yet to be attained.

In this moment, at this hour, the frozen bands of misery seemed loosed about his heart; he forgot the fatal passion whose treachery had struck the first blow at his youth and its paradise of hope; he forgot the taunts and sneers of his foe, the coldness and disbelief of his kindred, the un pitying thrusts of misfortune that had stabbed him with so merciless a persistence. In the serene cool calm of the early day, Nature spoke to him again as she had been used to speak, with a voice that lifted his soul above the things of

earth and time, and led him to the footstool of a Divine Consoler and the throne of an Infinite Mercy. The innate strength and nobleness of his nature revived and filled him with a heroism that only suffering could have taught. He took up the burden of existence once more, and so moved forward again to the world's great highway, resolved to accept his fate and endure its chances for sake of that higher life, those greater gifts, which lay beyond and above the things of time, and whose immeasurable glories dwarfed all earth's woes into insignificance, and all earth's joys into contempt.

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CIRCULATIVE
CHAPTER IV
Books & News P.

Thou wert a beautiful thought
And softly budded forth.—*Byron.*

It was the hottest hour of the hot summer noontide in Rome.

The brazen yellow sunshine lay on the waters of the Tiber, on the dirty, narrow, ill-paved streets, on the deserted bridges and closed shutters of the houses. It beat against the panes of a little window from whence sprung a tiny balcony that overlooked the banks of that once glorious river, the pride of every Roman, be he ever so great or ever so humble. Both window and balcony belonged to a tumbledown-looking house, ancient and poverty-stricken. In the room within, a girl was sitting alone at a table covered with books and mss. One hand was buried in the soft heavy clusters of her hair. The sleeves of her simple dress were thrown back from her bare snowy arms as if for coolness, and the flush on her cheeks which coloured their natural pallor was the flush of exhaustion and fever.

There was no breath of air anywhere. The intense mid-summer heat seemed doubly hot in this small close room; and the flowers, which were its only adornment, looked faded and withered as they drooped from vase and glass. She pushed away her books at last with a weary languid gesture, and rising, went over to the little casement and leaned out as if for a breath of air.

"If only we were not so poor," she sighed. "If only we could breathe the air on the heights, and get away from the hot desert breaths and the pestilential odours of the swamps. The sky here is like a brazen vessel. I think it is only the sound of the fountains that keeps life in one at all!"

And indeed she was right ; for, when the fever-mists lie heavy on the air and the sky has never a cloud, and the faces of the people grow pale and their eyes heavy, and the wearied horses and laden oxen pant and faint with drought—at times like this, Rome would not be bearable, were it not for the endless water-songs that fall on the ear from ruined walls and arches, and shades of dusky streets and every steep and stony way, until the splash and tinkle of the silver notes come to be the one sound longed for, and blessed.

As the girl leant there in the hot sunshine, a step came up the narrow stairs, a feeble, halting step, that made her turn swiftly and suddenly to the door, and descend to give the aid of her strong young arm to the old man who was slowly and toilfully approaching.

Very old and very feeble he seemed, though the girl's tender care and loving welcome gave a momentary brightness to his face, and his step grew a trifle quicker.

"How tired you are," she said gently ; "there, sit down and rest. I have some wine here cooling for you, and bread and fruit too. You must want food."

He seated himself and let her remove his hat, and bring him the fruit and wine on a little table which she placed by his side.

"Thank you, my dear," he said, looking lovingly at her fair girlish face. "It is good to have such a handmaiden even if one is poor and of no account."

"Have you brought any news?" she asked.

"I have, the best of news. We are going to leave Rome for the summer. Does that please you?"

"Oh yes!" she said joyfully. "This heat is killing you, dear *maestro*, and even I grow indolent and dull and can work at nothing. But how is it? Where are we to go?"

"Well, it is not far, dear, only to a villa on the hills; it is owned by Prince Sanfrano, the same gentleman who secured my appointment as organist at Father Crispin's. He wishes me to look over some valuable MSS. in his musical library, and classify and arrange them. The work is light and the pay large, and besides, he says he himself goes away from Rome now, and I cannot do better than take up my abode in his villa till the music is done. 'But my grand-daughter?' I said. 'Bring her with you,' was the reply. 'The city is too hot for her at this season, and perhaps she may help you.'"

"What a good kind man he must be," said the girl.

"Good! my child, there are few like him, so rich and generous, and never a thought of himself, always of others, Well, are you not glad?"

"Very glad," she said softly. "Only just before you came I was lamenting that we were so poor that we must stay here through the burning summer drought, suffering alike in mind and body for the want of just a little money to take us to the mountains. Oh, dear Marco, when will you let me help you, *really*?"

The old man touched her cheek caressingly.

"All in good time, my child. Let me see, you are but fifteen, as near as we can guess. A little more patience still. It would be a pity to mar your future by a hasty step now. And another thing, child, we have always one fear when we challenge public notice—Già."

"But he has no claim. He could not force me to go away with him now," she said impetuously.

The old man shook his head.

"He is a bad man, and revengeful. We never can tell what he may choose to do. I only wonder he has never traced us yet."

"But you kept me disguised so long; and then we lived so quietly, never going out except at night. How could he?"

"The evil have many ways and means of which you know nothing. My dear, if I only knew your future was secure I should die happy."

The girl knelt down and rested her arms on his knee, looking tenderly up at the old wrinkled world-worn face above her.

"Dear Marco, do not talk of dying. What should I do without you?"

"My dear, God will be your protector; and the gift He has given and the genius He has implanted in your nature will be your best comforters for any of life's woes. You have a noble future stretching out before you. You are so unlike all others of your sex, too. You have none of their petty tyrannies, and caprices, and foolish wasteful vanities. You are a true child of Art, Quità, and I pray you may remain so; it may exile you from much that your sex at large esteem, but it will compensate to you for all lesser love or poorer joys if only you cling to it faithfully and serve it well."

She looked thoughtfully away beyond him and out to the distant waters, that lay so still and calm in the hot haze of the sunshine.

"I should like to be great," she said softly, as if speaking to herself more than to him; "but then women are so weak. I think of Prosperzia's fate."

"It was the cruelty of man that killed her," he said, with

a sudden chill of fear in his heart. "Oh, my dear, my dear, I forgot that you will soon be a woman!"

"Is it so sad a thing?"

"If you are alone, no; if you let a rival to your art creep within your breast and whisper of vainer, lower joys, yes. You see you have known nothing of your own sex, and you are so strong, and brave, and loyal, and you have so much genius that all these great and good gifts should make you happy, if you would but keep to them alone. But will you?"

She looked up at him with clear untroubled eyes.

"Of a certainty, yes," she said. "Why should you fear otherwise? I can never be sad or unhappy while I have music to console me."

"You have had a strange life for a girl," he resumed presently: "old books, and crabbed lore, and an old, sad, gloomy companion."

"Never *that*," she interrupted.

"Well, my dear, so you say, because you care for me in that tender womanish way of yours, but all the same the thoughts of age are not those of youth, though you are so full of the past and its wonders, and content to learn what I teach, and live in dreams and feed on poems and idyllic fancies, all unreal, impossible, even in their very purity and nobility—still a time may come when the woman's heart within you will awaken, and then——"

He paused.

"Do you fear for me, then?" she asked.

"I fear for your Art."

"What makes you speak of these things to-day?" she said softly.

"Because to-day for the first time these ten years that we have lived together I seem to have discovered that your childhood has slipped away without my even noting its progress."

"And why to-day?" she questioned softly.

But he would not answer. He did not like to tell the girl who was so thoroughly unconscious of her own charms of face and form, that the Prince who had offered him his villa on the breezy heights so far from the city's heat and breath, had said at the same time:

"By the way, Rosa, what are you going to do with that breathing piece of sculpture of yours? She grows more perfect every day."

And these words had troubled the old man sorely, for to him Quità seemed still a child, though nigh ten years had passed since she had been rescued from Già's tyranny by him.

A child she might have been in innocence, unworldliness,

docility, but in her dreamy eyes, and graceful stature, and soft pale beauty of feature there lived the loveliness of dawning womanhood now, and Rosa knew that men would not be blind to it much longer nor leave her so either.

She did not ask him further questions, seeing he was silent. She was at no time a great speaker, being too full of dreams and thoughts to heed much the trifling details that pressed for notice.

"You see, my dear," resumed the old man presently, "you are very fair, and the life for which you are destined is one that places a woman's beauty in the full blaze of the world's sunlight. Some, the dazzle scorches, some it blinds, few there are it leaves unharmed. When I was very young, but a few years older than yourself, I knew such a woman as I fear you will be, very gifted, very fair, whose voice, they say, let fall notes like a rain of diamonds. She was a queen in her way—the world adored her. Many loved her, I among them. She did not care for me—no, but she was very gentle, and showed no scorn of my unworthy suit, as indeed she might have done; I was so poor and humble in those days. But a time came when she too loved, when all of earth and all of heaven lay for her in the eyes of one man. It is such an old, old story, my dear, every generation of man can but repeat it, and yet how each soul suffers for it individually. He wearied of her and forsook her. Then her life seemed to fade just like a flower at the breath of winter's kiss. She lost all her beauty; her genius seemed of no account, and then—she died. That is all!"

The girl looked up at him with soft eyes of sympathy. The sense of sorrow and of woe in days gone by oppressed her pure and lofty fancies, and chilled her heart with a dim sense of some future suffering that might touch herself.

"Is life all sad?" she sighed.

"The greater part of it is," he answered her. "And women find it saddest of all. Even you, dear, who are innocent and tender of nature, and lofty and pure in soul, even you may not escape. It is the destiny of all who live."

His voice ceased.

Quità looked up at his face and saw his thoughts were far away, perhaps living again that sweet dead past, when love could breathe its sorrows into dreams as fair as hers. She rose softly from her place and left him with the sunshine falling across his silvered hair till it looked like the halo of a saint.

"How good he is!" she murmured to herself. "And yet his life has been but one long sorrow. Is God just?"

CHAPTER V

And come what may
I have been blest.—*Byron.*

TEN years have passed since Cecil Calverley left his little waif in the charge of Mère Thérèse—passed quietly, unobtrusively, dreamily, their passage marked to the child but by the festivals of the Saints' Calendar, and the changes of the seasons as they robed or robbed the outer world, and brightened only by the visits of her protector and guardian. Into that quiet retreat no sign of turmoil, no stir of the strifes and passions and conflicts of life ever came. The ministry of the sisterhood was carried on from day to day, and month to month, and the child learned from one or other whatever they could teach ; languages from one, music from another, broidery and exquisite needlework, the use of herbs and plants, the skill and gentleness of a nurse, the patience, compassion, and steadiness of nerve so useful to a woman, and almost as rare as needful. Such training, and such an education, gave her a gravity beyond her years, a heroism beyond her sex ; gave her, too, an utter unconsciousness of her own growing loveliness, which made her an object of wonder and admiration to the sisters. Tall, graceful, pliant as a willow stem, with a face calm and exquisite as a pictured saint ; eyes lustrous yet thoughtful, a smile of wonderful sweetness and a certain gravity and sadness ever on the soft curved lips, she was little like the rosy cherub whose infantine beauty had delighted Cecil's artistic eyes in her mossy nest in the wood.

For the first five years after placing her at the convent, he had come regularly twice in each year to see her. The time had passed pleasantly enough for the child, in the simple friendly care of the good Superior, who had loved her with an exceeding love that almost approached adoration. Much of her life had been spent out of doors among the woods and orchard grounds surrounding the home, and the figure of the little child, with her cloud of flying hair and her quick restless movements, had grown to be a familiar and welcome sight there. Even the birds flocked round her for their never-failing meal of crumbs as fearlessly as if she were one of themselves, and she would imitate their calls and songs with marvellous accuracy, and bring them to perch on her shoulders and wrists, and sway in flocks above her head, till the amazed sisters declared it was almost a miracle.

But it was only the miracle of freedom and fearlessness,

the innate sympathy with all living or sentient Nature—from bird, or beast, or insect, to tree, or flower, or blossom. To her everything was beautiful on the earth, from the first bud of spring to the frost-crystal of winter ; in bursting blossom and blushing fruit, in the strange sweet music of birds, in the drowsy hum of insect life, in the depths of fathomless waters and winding forests, in the rhyming melodies of blowing winds, and babbling streams, and rustling leaves there was ever and always the same beauty that is free to all sight, but sealed to most appreciation.

She knew nothing of sorrow personally. She saw much suffering, and ministered to it with the dove-like grace and tender compassion of a sister of mercy ; but to her no sickness came, no suffering fell. She had thriven with marvellous perfection since that one almost fatal illness, from whose death-like trance Cecil's voice had roused her. She was suffered to go to and fro at will, from sunrise to sunset ; her strength was not tasked, her mind was not burdened, and she grew up gradually to health and grace and loveliness, as if in very rebellion against the fate that had left her to perish.

Of her own discovery she knew ; but no sense of shame, no hint that might distress or disturb her innocent soul had ever been spoken in her ear, or allowed to come to her knowledge. And, in her way, she was proud, and had a certain dauntlessness and calm that were rather fostered than rebuked by the incessant praise and love bestowed upon her.

As years went by, her passionate love and reverence for Cecil increased. It was the one link that bound her to the outer world ; and the rarity of his visits invested him with an almost superstitious wonder in her eyes. As they lessened, and from half-yearly grew annual, and then occurred at even longer periods, she was intensely pained and perplexed ; but she never would have dared to reproach him, and only waited, and hoped, and longed for his coming in the sweet, calm, monotonous days of her convent life, with a patience that her training was well calculated to give.

But these ten years that had drifted by so uneventfully for her, had been full of purpose and momentous with events for her self-appointed guardian.

Once roused from his lethargy of despair, once nerved to the effort of endurance, Cecil Calverley had taken up the burden of life and borne it with the fortitude and patience that wins victory from all the hardships and privations time may bring.

A strange, solitary, exiled life he led, giving to Art from

necessity what he had once given from love ; sad often, and weary often of the struggles and the pain, uncheered through all those years by any voice of love, by any word from the land of his birth ; his identity hidden under a feigned name, he himself forgotten in that great world he had left, save by a friend who vainly sought and a woman who as vainly loved him. To both of these came neither word nor sign ; a silence as of the grave seemed to have fallen between this man and them : and slowly, gradually, as that veil of silence darkened over his memory, they ceased to speak or to wonder, though they remembered still.

Sometimes a thought of the home he had loved, the ties he had broken, the friendship he had forsaken, came to Cecil with an overmastering longing to hear some other tidings of all these, save just the chance news that he read in printed records of the great world's doings, words which spoke of Lord Danvers as a statesman of marvellous ability and ever-increasing influence ; of the new Earl of Strathavon's marriage, and the birth of a son and daughter ; of the gossip of the *beau-monde* of Paris, when the lovely notoriety they had named "Faustine" shone upon them from the ranks of their own order, and with her beauty and her wealth, her caprices and extravagances dazzled them into wonder, and exacted from them a certain acknowledgment of the position she had won.

All these things drifted to him through strange and divers channels, waking something of the pain that Time had lulled to temporary rest, the pain that had come to him with the first shock of treachery, and the first stroke of misfortune.

Into his lonely self-contained life, no friendship entered, no thoughts of softer ties or dearer hopes awoke, even with the passage of the years.

He had gone to Rome and worked there as a painter, giving up all his time to his one beloved pursuit, labouring untiringly, unceasingly, and with that set and unalterable resolve that combats all difficulties and opposes to obstacles a resistance so inflexible that they can but acknowledge defeat, however unwillingly. If "the labour we delight in physics pain," Cecil Calverley should most assuredly have bought that remedy for his sufferings, and as time went on he knew their first sharpness was deadened and their first agony subsiding. He had resolved to achieve greatness for himself in that future which treachery had darkened and dishonour had embittered ; and when a man's heart is sternly and determinedly set on one single thing, and to its accomplishment, he brings all the energies of his nature, all

the gifts of his intellect, it is odd indeed if fortune favour him not, for very reluctance of admiration, for very caprice of will. And fortune had favoured him in a manner.

Slowly and surely he had wound his way up that steep and slippery eminence, slowly and surely with a dauntless faith in the future, and a dogged persistence in the present, he had laboured and toiled and achieved. These ten years had passed almost like a dream; now he looked back on them. His youth, his dreams, his love, with all its fatal sorcery, looked phantomlike and indistinct. To himself he seemed changed out of all likeness to the frank, sunny-tempered boy, who had looked on the world as a paradise of enjoyment; who had revelled in its treasures of art, and woven a golden dream of bliss from the haze of a passionate worship.

All these things looked so far, so terribly far away now; yet there were enough of the poet-fancies of old in him still to soften the bitterness of this broken ideal, to make him vaguely conscious of the pure and tender beauty of that lost youth, which had drifted into the dimness of a memory. Ofttimes in the isolation of his life in that old Latin villa set far amidst the sloping hillsides of Rome, these thoughts would steal to him, these memories would return, and with them a passionate longing for the joys they had promised; only to withhold.

It seemed to him as if the only tie that bound him to any likeness with his fellow-men was that strong link between the little life he had saved, and his own. The sweet spontaneous affection of the child was very dear to him, and the beauty and simplicity and innocence of her life gave him a complete content in her welfare. And she was so much a child still in her words and ways that the passage of years seemed scarcely to change her, and were equally unnoticed by himself.

It chanced, however, that his annual visit had for once been prevented. He had accepted a commission to go abroad with a party of tourists to make some necessary sketches. The plan had been hastily decided upon; the offer hastily made and as suddenly accepted. For a year he had been absent from Rome, and for more than a year had not seen Félise. A year—nothing to himself, but just that most important year in a woman's life, when the boundary of childhood is crossed, even if unconsciously.

And in that year she had crossed it,

CHAPTER VI

"YOU HAVE DEFIED ME"

Something the heart must have to cherish,
 Must joy and pain and sorrow learn,
 Something with passion clasp, or perish,
 And in itself to ashes burn.

"I MUST go and see the child," said Cecil to himself as the salt cool air of the sea blew over his face, and the great ship took her stately way over the width of waters to the land from which he had been long absent.

He sent no word of his coming. He knew the surprise would be all the sweeter to the faithful little heart that held his memory in so dear a reverence, so fond a gratitude. But when he came to the familiar place and heard the flying footsteps of his waif coming to welcome him, he stared in amazement at the graceful maiden who burst upon his vision in place of the child he had last seen. He remembered the face he had once painted, the face of the child Christ, looking out from a background of shadow with soft pathetic eyes, but here before him was a face that had an angel's calm and almost a woman's loveliness. The soft black robe that clothed the slender form showed every graceful curve and line, the bright fair hair waving over the low brow rippled in careless natural beauty over the beautifully-shaped head, and was then knotted back in its own simple wealth. Childhood, girlhood, all seemed to have vanished, he only recognised her by her eyes.

She came swiftly towards him with a cry of welcome that thrilled his heart with its ecstasy of gladness. Her arms were round his neck in the old familiar childish welcome, her lovely parted lips upraised for the accustomed caress he had been used to give. For a moment astonishment held him powerless and silent. It seemed to him for the first time that he had no right to touch those girlish lips, to clasp that maiden form; the child he had saved, sheltered, loved, had vanished so utterly now. His coldness seemed to pain her; she withdrew from his embrace and looked wonderingly up at his face.

"It is so long since you have been," she said breathlessly; "and now you have come, are you not even glad?"

The sweet musical voice recalled him to himself.

"Félice," he said, "is it really you? My child, I should not have known you!"

"That is right," she said gladly, "still *your child*; I thought you had forgotten me. Am I changed?"

"Changed!" he exclaimed, "I left you a child, I find a woman. This last year has indeed transformed you."

"Not in heart," she said softly. "Now come and sit down and tell me where you have been so long, and when you will take me with you. You remember you promised I should not stay here when I was once grown up. You yourself find that I have done that at last."

"You have indeed," he said, as if still bewildered.

"It is so good, so good to see you once more," she said in her old fond childish way. "I thought something must have happened; you were never away so long before."

"Have you been well?" he asked.

"Well? I am always well!"

"And happy?"

"I should be happier with—you."

The face before her flushed beneath its sun-tan at the frank unembarrassed words.

"You are a child at heart still," he said softly, "but in all else how changed!"

"It is strange to hear you say that," she answered. "I can see no change save that I have grown taller, and am made to wear my hair like this" (turning her head to him with a pretty, graceful gesture). "Do you like it better?"

There was no vanity in the simple question, it was merely the natural desire to know that he was pleased. Cecil smiled.

"It is very pretty, but I think I like the old way best."

"Then I shall go back to it," she said impetuously. "I only care for what pleases you."

"Stop!" he said hurriedly as she raised her hands with the evident intention of pulling the beautiful rippling clusters about her face and shoulders, in the old child-fashion. "Stop, Félise, my opinion is only that of a man; doubtless the sisters know best what is suitable."

"But you are my guardian—I wish to do what you like only."

"My dear," he said gently, "do you know that I have no claim on you whatever; that at any time if your parents were discovered or your history known, I must give up all control, care, or knowledge of your future, if they so willed it?"

She turned very pale.

"You could not be so cruel," she said. "You know I love you; you have been everything to me since my childhood. I can never repay the debt of gratitude I owe you. It would

break my heart to be taken from you. Oh, pray do not say such things to me again !”

Cecil looked at her in perplexity, the responsibility of his self-appointed guardianship began to press heavily upon his notice at last.

“I do not wish to pain you, Félice,” he said gently. “Far from it; but you are growing to womanhood now, and I cannot let you be blind any longer to the duties or trials before you. Tell me, are you tired of your secluded life here ?”

“Oh yes,” she said eagerly. “It is all very calm and peaceful and fair, and I have been very happy, and love Mère Thérèse and the good sisters dearly, but——”

“So there is a *but* !” he said smiling.

“Oh yes, I want to see the world I read of,” she said, flushing and paling alternately with excited feeling. “The beautiful cities and countries. The fair women and noble men, all who are great in Art and Science. All who are heroes in their own day. All——”

“My dear child,” he interrupted, “where did you hear of these things ?”

“From books, partly,” she said ; “lately from Père Jerome.”

Cecil started as if an adder had stung him.

“Père Jerome !” he repeated. “What have you to do with him ?”

The girl coloured and looked half shyly down at the polished floor, on which her slender foot was nervously tracing a pattern.

“He is confessor here,” she said at last, “and he has taught me a great deal——”

“That you had better never have learnt,” interrupted Cecil impetuously.

“Do you think so ?” she said, half in wonder. “I did not know you would have objected.”

“Do you pray to the saints and believe all the mummary you hear ?” he asked sternly.

“No ; only to God,” she said gravely. “Mère Thérèse said you wished me to be brought up without any undue influence as regards religion. She always allowed me to read your books, and from them I learnt many things which made me averse to following blindly the creeds they taught here : but Père Jerome said it was wrong of her to do this, and he has come often and often within the last two years, and talked, and discussed, and argued on all the points I doubted, and tried hard to convince me that I was wrong in my views.”

Cecil rose impatiently and paced the room.

"Must that wolf have even *this* lamb?" he muttered.

The girl looked up at him with troubled, wistful eyes.

"I have angered you," she said with a touch of piteousness in her voice that went to his heart. He came to her side again.

"My child—no—not you. It is only this crafty priest whose influence over you I dread. What more has he said?"

"He told me much of the world and all the great and beautiful things it contains. He said that doubtless you would deprive me of seeing them as you destined me for a convent life."

"He said *that*—the liar!"

She had never heard such bitter wrathful passion in his voice as filled it now. She sat silent and terrified, gazing at him with her large soft eyes. "I did not believe it," she murmured.

The words recalled him to himself.

"Believe it. No! You would not have been what I think you, had you given such falsehood a moment's credence."

"I do not like Père Jerome," she resumed presently; "he tells me things no one has ever dared to whisper, and he angers me greatly. Besides, he said once that it lay in my power to rescue or ruin your soul, and that all the tortures of hell would be my lot if I did not strive my utmost to convert you."

Cecil laughed contemptuously.

"Félice," he said, "this is no longer a fit home for you, since even your innocence and unworldliness cannot save you from the snares of the tempter. I will speak with Mère Thérèse; go—ask her to see me. She has not kept to her part of our agreement, in giving you over to the craft and subtlety of priesthood. From to-day our compact ends."

The girl looked at his stern pale face in terror.

"Do not blame her," she entreated, "she is so old and so helpless, and Père Jerome has known her so many years now. It is not wonderful that he has influence over her."

"I will not blame her," Cecil said gravely, "I will only tell her this is no longer a place for you." And awed and silenced by that grave voice and stern set face, the girl said no more, but bent gracefully to him and left the room.

"So, holy father, you have set your mark even here!" muttered the young man angrily. "A wolf in the sheepfold indeed, poisoning and polluting this beautiful, innocent mind with your vile teachings and tempting!"

As the hot, passionate words left his lips, a door at the

opposite end of the room slowly opened, and revealed the portly form and calm handsome face of the very man of whom these words had been spoken.

As Cecil Calverley turned round and faced his old foe, some of that animal lust, that evil longing for the mere savage pleasure of revenge, which lurks in almost all human nature, needing but temptation to arouse, awoke and leaped to swift vigorous life within his heart.

For ten years they had not met, and all this time Cecil's hatred of his enemy had been lulled to a dull and sullen rest: but now, with the memory of the child's words, with the fresh remembrance of his own wrongs, with the old passionate defiance and instinctive hate of his past youth for this man who had been its destroyer, that rest was broken asunder, and all the hatred and scorn of his soul spoke out in the glance that met and lightened on the priest.

Père Jerome started involuntarily, then recovering his self-possession he bent his head and advanced with courteous greeting. Cecil neither noticed nor returned it, save by that glance of fiery wrath, chained down and kept in leash only by determined effort.

As their eyes met a vague chill fear crept into the mind of the priest. For the first time he saw not a boy whom he had wronged and deceived, but a man risen triumphant over the oppressions he had dealt, with the fortitude of a true courage and the knowledge of unmerited wrong.

"It is long since we met, Mr. Cecil," he said at last, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "I am glad to see you once more; and so little changed too. Time has dealt very gently with you to all appearances."

Cecil Calverley's eyes never relaxed from their fierce and wrathful gaze.

"Why are you here?" he asked sternly. "Are you playing the spy on my doings still? I should have thought you had gained all that was to be gained by that, ten years ago."

The colour revived a little in the dark olive cheek.

"Ten years; is it really so long?" he murmured. "Well, to answer your question, I can only say I have infinitely more right here than you yourself."

Cecil smiled sarcastically.

"I suppose so; nevertheless, monsieur, since we have met, I would have you know that I do not choose to have the mind of my ward tampered with, nor her soul perplexed and disturbed by doctrines you have a mind to inculcate, and I—a fancy to disbelieve."

"My son," cried the priest in bland astonishment, "far be it from me to interfere with your fatherly prerogatives——"

"What word did you use?"

"A thousand pardons if it offends you. One can but speak as one thinks."

"I imagine that is the last thing in the world you are capable of doing, holy father."

The priest made a graceful deprecating gesture with his white hand.

"It is but pity and love for all erring souls that induce the members of our Holy Church to seek and reclaim even the humblest and unworthiest of her subjects. Have I offended you by my zeal in the welfare of my young disciple?"

"She is no disciple of yours and never will be while I have power to prevent it," said Cecil, in a low stern voice of wrathful indignation.

A mocking ironical laugh left the priest's lips.

"Say you so? What if I be able to do what you have never succeeded in doing—find out the secret of her parentage!"

Instinctively Cecil started, then as quickly recovering himself, he looked at him with a smile of supreme disdain.

"When you *have* succeeded it will be time enough to discuss the point at issue; till then, I forbid you all intercourse with her. Disobey me at your peril. You have no boy to deal with now, but a man strong to defend what is helpless, and who will so defend it at any cost."

The stern cold words roused all the anger so long held in check in the priest's heart. His dulcet softness gave way. His eyes flashed kindred fire.

"Such words are not said twice," he answered haughtily. "You have defied me; take care a day does not come when your words will reap a bitter harvest for your insult now, even as in days gone by!"

Cecil smiled contemptuously.

"I have been well-used to wordy wars with you, monsieur," he said, while in his eyes the fiery scorn and hatred he felt for this man deepened and darkened, "but you have done your worst; your threats or your prophecies do not alarm me any longer."

As the words left his lips Félise appeared in the doorway. Both men turned and looked at her—one with wonder and admiration mingled in his gaze, the other with the ruthless unsparing greed that had marked her as his prey since first his scheme had taken root in his mind.

"Mère Thérèse will see you," she said to Cecil. "I will lead you to her."

And gracefully returning the priestly salutation of Père Jerome, she glided away through the antique corridors and gloomy passages that led to the Superior's room.

Left alone, the priest's eyes grew dark and stormy with the passion that raged in his heart. Slowly he paced the room, his hands crossed upon his breast, his head bent in musing attitude. One looking at him then might have thought only of the meditative repose of the face, the calm and dignified grace of the figure. But no calm thoughts were those, curbed and chained by force of long habit within that proud and warped and ambitious nature.

"What evil fate has thrown him across my path now?" he muttered below his breath. "Will he try to thwart me here? Ah well, it shall be war to the knife, even to the bitter end. If I hated you ere this, Cecil Calverley, for your own sake, I hate you tenfold now for—hers!"

CHAPTER VII

THE HAND OF THE CHURCH

. . . . And when I sue
God for myself, He hears that name of thine
And sees within my eyes the tears of two.

MERE THÉRÈSE was very weak and very feeble now. She knew a time was at hand when she must lay aside all dignities of office, all the simple cares of her daily life, and so pass on into the shadows of that unknown land of which the greatest and the wisest of us know so little.

The peaceful calm of her life had been seldom broken, the inaction and monotony, the duties she had to fulfil, the labours she loved to perform, were all endeared to her by long habit and association. But day by day she felt her strength failing, and saw the end drawing near and more near. As Cecil entered her room now and bent low before her in that reverence her years always claimed from him, a great glad light came into her dim eyes, the hand outstretched to him trembled in his firm and gentle clasp.

"My son, welcome. It is long indeed since I saw your face."

The young girl came and stood beside the aged woman, her fairness and youth seeming all the fairer and younger by force of that strong contrast. Involuntarily Cecil's eyes rested on her as she stood there with the spring sunlight falling on her shining hair, and all the love and sweetness and compassion of her nature speaking out in her softly eloquent eyes.

"You find the child well, do you not?" continued the aged

woman, looking up fondly at the bright young face by her side.

"Yes," said Cecil, seating himself and following that proud fond gaze with a sudden pang of regret, "very well, and grown almost beyond claims of childhood, madame. It is of that I wish to speak. Félise, my child, I must ask you to let me have a few words in private with Mère Thérèse."

The young girl bowed and moved away with that instinctive obedience to which she had been habituated.

Cecil followed her and opened the door. "Do not go to Père Jerome," he said in a low somewhat stern voice. "I wish to see you again after I have left the Superior."

"Is she not fair as an angel?" said Mère Thérèse enthusiastically, as he returned and seated himself by her side. "And so sweet and so good too! Never was there child like her. Heaven and our Holy Mother grant her a happy life and a long one."

"Two things that seldom go together, dear madame," said Cecil. "You have not lived in the world or you would have known that. Meanwhile, I have come here to discuss this subject of Félise's future life, with you. She is a child no longer, you must see that for yourself. Thanks to your care and guardianship, she is well educated, healthy, and happy. But she cannot remain here always; indeed, I doubt if it is safe to let her do so any longer, considering that some breath of evil has already tainted the purity and innocence of her young life."

"Evil! My son, it is impossible!"

Cecil smiled coldly.

"I think not, madame. You know the conditions I imposed on you respecting the child. I placed her here that she might be maintained and protected; I have paid you all these years for maintenance; I distinctly directed that no undue pressure respecting religious teaching should be brought to bear upon her, that whatever books I selected she was to read. You know this, and you promised me my wishes should be strictly attended to. Have they been so?"

"My son, as far as lay in my power——"

"Your power!" retorted Cecil scornfully. "I might have known that, like the reeds that the currents of the rivers sway, are the women of your order, under priestly direction. What does Père Jerome do here? What right has he to impart to my ward the doctrines of confession? Can you answer me?"

"He has shown a great interest in the child," murmured the aged woman. "I do not think his teaching has done her any harm. He is a good man of saintly renown. He comes

here with an authority I dare not gainsay. I—I did not think you would object.”

“Object!” Cecil’s teeth closed tightly to keep back the bitter words that longed for utterance. “We will not discuss the subject further,” he said presently. “It is only necessary to inform you that a time has come when I must make some arrangements respecting the child’s future. She must leave here, and that at once.”

“At once!”

“Well, I do not mean this very hour, but soon, within a few days or weeks. I have thought out no plan yet, but I must do so. I will not have her one day longer than I can help near the accursed presence of that priest.”

“My son, my son, this is rank heresy!”

A bitter smile curled Cecil’s lips. “Let me suffer for it, then, reverend mother, it has naught to do with you. I would I could settle for it with its author as man to man. It would be a short reckoning, and a swift, if I mistake not.”

“Indeed, my son, I must not listen to you, it is deadly sin. Such feelings are wrong, unchristian. Are we not bidden to love our enemies, to forgive them, to refrain from vengeance?”

“Preach those maxims to your own sex and sisterhood, dear madame,” said Cecil more gently. “They are not doctrines with which I hold, or many men either in this world!”

“Are you alone in that world you speak of?” said the aged woman after a short silence. “I mean have you any ties? Are you married?”

“Married! God forbid!” said Cecil briefly.

A troubled look came over the worn and venerable face. “Have you thought what it is you do, my son? You will take the child from here into the world, you say. What then?”

A dark cloud crossed the grave and weary face. Cecil’s eyes met hers in momentary perplexity.

“What then?” he retorted. “I do not know yet. Why not adopt and keep her with myself? I am lonely enough, Heaven knows.”

“She loves you very dearly. You stand to her in the place of all she has lost, all she has ever known. But, pardon me, my son, you are scarce old enough to play a father’s part to a girl so young and beautiful.”

Cecil looked at her with grave surprise.

“From one so unworldly as yourself, reverend mother, I scarcely expected to hear such doubts. You surely think I am to be trusted. The child will be as safe in my hands as

in yours. Were I really her father I could scarcely feel more reverently and tenderly towards her than I do."

"I do not doubt you—my son, far from it. You have been her saviour, her benefactor, all these past years, and you have that in your face which makes one trust you involuntarily. But will you take my advice? I love this child as I have loved nothing on this earth in all my many years. Place her with some woman friend, under some guardianship at which no one can ever cavil. A breath of ill-fame to a woman in her tender youth is as a blight to all the promise of her future. You would not like her own lips to blame you in after years?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Then do you not see what I mean? Am I not right? A woman looks at these things differently to a man."

"Yes; you are quite right," he said somewhat absently. "I will do my best. I do not know, as you say, that it would be well to keep her with myself, and yet where will she find more careful guardianship? Still, for her sake——"

"It is for her sake in the future that I spoke, my son."

"And you were more wise than I, despite your convent life," he answered, smiling faintly as he rose from his chair.

"And she may remain here until you have made some suitable arrangements?" questioned the Superior eagerly.

"On one condition, madame."

"And that is——?"

"That she neither sees, nor communicates with, nor receives instruction from Père Jerome."

"If it be against your wishes, my son, rest assured she shall not do so."

"It is against my wishes, and if you cannot give me this promise the child shall leave with me now."

The aged woman bent her head.

"I promise," she said simply.

"And I *trust* you," answered Cecil, stooping and touching with his lips the pale and trembling hands that lay upon her lap. "Farewell now, dear madame. I will let you know as speedily as possible what arrangements I have made. Where shall I find Félise?"

"I will send her to you," answered the Superior, ringing the bell by her side to give the necessary order. He bent to her with the gentle reverence that sat so well upon him and left the room.

A few moments later and Père Jerome stood there in his place, his cold stern eyes fixed upon the trembling woman, his tranquil voice sounding in her ears with a weight of command she dared not disobey.

"But I promised, holy father," she murmured in a last feeble remonstrance.

"A promise to a heretic—what is that? I absolve you from it. Tell me all that has passed between you."

And with pale lips and faltering breath she told him.

Cecil Calverley stood before the child-maiden whose guardianship he had assumed, and looked down at her with grave and troubled eyes. Her own were radiant with an exceeding gladness; the thoughts of freedom, of release, of the imagined and unknown glories of the world before her, were intoxicating her young and ardent fancy, and filling her every pulse with an ecstasy of delight. To Cecil, even her gladness and enthusiasm were but added responsibility.

He had saved her, he had given her back life when that life had been almost doomed to destruction: and, to his own thinking, she in some way belonged to himself, and he felt he had a right to shelter and control her future, to see into what semblance it grew.

But in her beautiful girlhood these claims looked strangely different to what they had done in previous years. What to do with her now? that was the question that perplexed him. In a few brief words, that seemed almost cold to the young girl's excited fancy, he had told her of his interview with Mère Thérèse and of the wish she had expressed respecting her future guardianship.

The girl's eyes clouded in momentary disappointment.

"Then I am not to be with you?" she murmured sadly.

Cecil smiled involuntarily.

"I would be glad enough to have you, my child; but I must think for you, and see what is best. The world is censorious and bitter. You know nothing of its ways yet, thank Heaven; but when you do——"

"I never wish to," she interrupted, her pretty voice growing swift and eager as she looked at the grave and saddened face she loved so dearly. "I always thought—you always said—that when I had grown up you would take me away from here to live with you. Why do you speak of sending me to strangers? I cannot be happy then."

Cecil looked puzzled.

"I have no home," he said gravely, "and I am a wanderer and a Bohemian; my life would not suit you, nor would it be right for me to offer you such doubtful protection. A year or two more, my child, and even your innocence and unworldliness will have learnt that."

"I cannot understand why," she said sadly. "You are so good, so kind; you are the only friend I have ever known."

I have always thought so gladly of the time when I should be with you always—your child in very earnest—and now——”

Great tears brimmed the soft dark eyes. Cecil felt deeply distressed. He loved this little waif and stray he had rescued so carelessly once—loved her with a great and compassionate tenderness ; but a time had come when the responsibility he had accepted looked so grave and momentous that for once he almost doubted his wisdom in having burdened his life with it at all. But her grief moved him deeply ; involuntarily he drew her to his side, as in the days of her childish sorrows.

“You must not grieve, my child,” he said fondly. “Can you not trust me to do what is best ? It is of yourself, of your own good I think.”

“I am sure of that—pray do not think me ungrateful,” she said eagerly, and looking up in his face through the haze of her tears. “Yes, I have no right to complain of anything you wish. But for you, I should never have known how sweet and beautiful life is !”

Cecil sighed as the pretty, fair head leant against him with the old caressing childish grace.

“Ah ! little one,” he murmured regretfully, “why can you not be a child always ? I could have served you then.”

“In heart and in spirit I am your child still,” she said, looking up at his face with her eloquent eyes. “I will always be *that*, indeed, Monsieur Cecil.”

He smiled at the innocent words, the loving glance. “Will you ?” he said ; “well, then, a child’s first duty is obedience. Grant me that, in this first effort to serve your years of womanhood even as I have tried to shield and guard you in the past.”

She drew herself away from his arms and her face grew grave. “I will,” she said simply, then a smile joyous as a child’s, lovely as spring’s sunlight, lit her face and curved her lips. “Womanhood,” she murmured ; “it seems so strange to hear you speak of that !”

“No less strange for you to hear than for me to think,” he said sadly, and there was something desolate as well as tender in his voice.

For he thought of her future as well as of his own.

CHAPTER VIII

We twain shall not remeasure
The ways that left us twain.

Swinburne.

"VERE DANVERS was right when he said I should never have bound my life with any tie that would interfere with its freedom," thought Cecil Calverley, as he left the convent walls that had held in so long and secure a shelter the life that now seemed to disturb all the serenity and hard-worn peace of his own. "Heaven help me! What *am* I to do with the child?"

He was on his way to Paris now, forced thither by business demands sorely against his will. He thought of the years that had passed since last he had set foot in that enchanted city, of the contrast between himself then and now. He had been young, happy, free as air, leading a life at once rich and careless and content—a life wherein were intertwined the indolence and labour, the laughter and meditation, the philosophy and enjoyment that had made up the sum of his nature and the demands of his youth.

And all these things had been swept aside at one blow. The world had changed to him as utterly as if an enchanter's evil wand had been waved across its glory, giving gloom for sunlight and despair for joy.

He almost smiled now as he looked back on it all and remembered the changes that years had brought. Ten years! Who would remember him? who would care for him of the friends he had known? Not one, he felt assured. "Poor old Vere! I should like to see him again," he sighed regretfully. "I wonder if he is much changed, if he is married, confirmed old bachelor as he was? Married! by Heaven, I never thought of *that*. Could I ask him? Would he do it, I wonder?"

A sudden thought had flashed across his brain. It seemed to him that here at last, and through Lord Danvers' aid, might safe and pleasant shelter be found for the child he had just left. For himself or for his own sake he felt still reluctant to face his boyhood's friend, to hear his amazed questions, to keep even for him that veil of mystery around these bygone years; but for her—he paused and weighed the matter.

"There was his mother, too," he thought to himself; "she was a kind-hearted, gracious woman. Would she help me for Vere's sake, I wonder?"

He pondered on the idea—it seemed the only feasible one. He knew no other woman. His life in Rome had been one of almost hermitlike seclusion. He had shunned all society and lived always by himself, going nowhere, even when for Art's sake and his own well-merited fame he would have been warmly welcomed. But now it was imperative that something should be done, and for the first time in his life he felt how helpless is a man when dealing with the claims of a woman bound by no tie, endeared by no passion, yet to whom his protection and his friendship will alike be counted a wrong.

And so with the cares of manhood replacing the dreams of youth, with the deadened memories of past wrongs oppressing him, with the shadowy anxieties of the unknown future before him, Cecil Calverley stood once more in the City of Delight—looked on it with saddened eyes and weary heart.

The glories of the springtime were bright upon its surface, and all the gaiety and luxury and fashion of the world he had so long shunned were before him once again. He felt like a dreamer awakened from long sleep—a wanderer returning to scenes almost forgotten, as he took his way to the barriers of the west and saw the streams of carriages thronging the drives of the Bois.

Mechanically he passed along the once familiar ways and stood leaning negligently against the trees, while the spring sunshine that was so softly bright fell on the dashing equipages and lovely faces that Faubourg and fashion had sent to make the prescribed tour of the Bois de Boulogne.

Carelessly and unthinkingly he stood, and as carelessly his eyes glanced over the glittering throng. Suddenly his lips blanched to the whiteness of fear; he started, and his strong young frame trembled like a woman's under the influence of emotion. For there before him, with the sunlight on her beautiful face and a smile on her lips as she acknowledged the many recognitions of the aristocratic crowd around, was the woman he had once worshipped so madly, who had cast his love aside as a worthless toy in comparison with the rank and honours of another man.

Just as suddenly as he had seen her lying back in her carriage, so she saw him; involuntarily she leant forward, forgetful of the eyes around, the curiosity she might awaken, a scarlet flush burning over brow and cheek, a great, intense, almost passionate gladness in her eyes. For the life of her she could not have restrained that emotion, could not have resisted the impulse that bade her coachman stop the carriage and brought her face to face with the man she had wronged

in those days of glad and hopeful youth, of which no trace and scarcely any memory seemed left to him now.

"Monsieur Calverley !"

He bowed low and approached ; he could not well do less. But his face was stern and cold as a mask, and his eyes had no gladness in them.

"Madame de Besançon honours me too much by her remembrance," he said in his calmest and iciest manner, a manner as different to the frank gracious courtesy of old as was the manhood of his present years to the youth of his past.

The beautiful face paled suddenly. He looked at her with a sort of wondering curiosity, marvelling that she was so little changed, that these past years, that had so seared and burnt the brand of suffering into his own soul, could have left her with that bloom and lustre of loveliness scarcely less perfect than when he had stood by her side on the sands of Deauville. A great chill and coldness stole over him. The bygone years rolled back like a mist ; he remembered how he had knelt at her feet in the dusky summer shadows of the woods ; he remembered how her head had drooped upon his breast, how her lips had confessed their love, and—he saw her now, the wife of another, the betrayer of himself.

For a moment neither spoke. The man was schooling himself to rigid self-control, the woman's thoughts were busy with the softness of that one glad memory of her life ; her heart beneath its costly laces was aching beneath the bitterness of a long regret, the sad vision of a past whose sweetness she had denied herself, a sweetness that could never again be hers.

But sweet as rain is to the parched earth that burning suns have scorched, welcome as the voice of one that the grave has opened for and Heaven has given back, so were the voice and presence of this man as once again they met.

It was a strange moment, that moment when the conventionalities of life chained back all words that longed for utterance, and silenced their tongues as by a spell, while on each other's face their eyes dwelt perforce, reading the changes of the years that had come and gone.

"Are you staying in Paris?" she asked at last, breaking the long embarrassed silence.

"No ; I am only passing through on my way to England."

"You—you have not been living in England all these years?" she asked with a sudden vivid blush.

The smile on his lips was one of intense bitterness as he answered her :

"No, I have made my home in Italy. I hope to live there for the rest of my days."

She longed to question him of himself, his doings, but she dared not. His cold words, his chilling manner froze back her sympathy, and made her humbled and abashed before him.

"If you stay in Paris any time, will you come and see me?" she asked at length. "I live in the Avenue Champs Elysées. I—I have often wondered what had become of you—where you had wandered. Will you so far honour me for the sake of old times?"

"Does she fancy I have one spark of the old love left?" thought Cecil, looking with cold almost contemptuous eyes at the beautiful face. Aloud he said: "The honour would be all on my side, madame; but I regret I cannot avail myself of it. Imperative business calls me to England; the moment it is concluded I return to—Rome."

"To Rome! You live there! I wonder I have never seen you. I spent last winter there."

"I do not go into society. But I fear I am detaining you, madame," he answered coldly as he drew back and raised his hat. "Permit me to say adieu!"

"One moment!" she exclaimed eagerly. "I am not aware whom you are going to seek in England; but if it is Lord Danvers, he is here in Paris now during the Easter recess. Perhaps you did not know?"

Cecil started.

"I did not know. Yes, you are right; I intended going to England solely to see him. Can you favour me with his address?"

"Hotel Meurice," she answered rapidly. "I hope you will see him soon. He has so often spoken to me of your long absence. I think his is one of the few faithful friendships in the world."

She bowed her adieux then, and gave the signal for her carriage to move on. Her face was shadowed, her heart beat with wild excited throbs.

"After all these years," she murmured, "to meet again! And how he hates me now, and I—God help me—how I love him still!"

Passing onwards amidst that brilliant crowd, the heart of the Countess de Besançon grew very heavy. How empty her life seemed now; how cold, and cheerless, and hopeless a thing. She only remembered one summer morning by the sea.

"I must seem so base to him," she thought to herself. "He would never understand, never forgive; and now it is

too late to alter anything or explain. Has he forgotten? I think he has. Men's memories are not faithful as ours—we who remember even those who have wronged us, if only we have loved them once."

And she sank wearily back on her cushions, and saw neither the sunshine, nor the faces, nor the beauty around.

Her soul was back in the past—back with the memories of the man she had wronged even when she only meant to serve him, of the happiness she had sacrificed and laid aside in the grave of bygone years—only to see it rise once more from its hidden sepulchre, and mock her with the remembered sweetness of the old dead days.

Her wedded life had been like that of most Frenchwomen. She had had a year of frantic idolisation from her husband; then he had apparently wearied, and their lives had drifted apart more and more. Society had been chary of receiving her, and the set in which she moved was a very fast and somewhat reckless one; but if the world had sought occasion to whisper scandal of one so suddenly raised to high rank, and enabled by that to set it at defiance, it sought in vain.

Unstable, capricious, self-indulgent, she was as of old, bent on gratifying every whim and reckless as to cost of any caprice, but no worse than that. To men she was as recklessly bewitching, as provokingly indifferent as ever. Throned in security now, her empire was even more extensive than of yore, when she had only been Faustine the incomprehensible. That name was never whispered in her presence, but it was not forgotten by those who envied, by those who loved, by those who suffered for her caprices. She had many enemies, and not one true friend. Her life, with all its outward splendour, was empty and desolate within, as many a fashionable life is. In a cold and careless fashion she was faithful to her husband and considerate of him; if he was nothing to her, at least he but shared the fate of all other men, and in time he grew accustomed to that fact, and accepted it as a consolation for his own wasted affection.

He had been furiously jealous of her at times, but with little foundation for the feeling; and, though he had turned to others for comfort with some vague idea of piquing her into a demonstration of anger or regard, he had utterly failed. Her indifference was too perfect to be moved, too heartfelt for the fires of jealousy to thaw, and this bitterness was greatest to him of all. She gave him a rigid obedience when he demanded it; she closed her doors on men whose attentions had awakened his jealous rage the moment he bade her do so; she gave him no handle for

complaint against herself, careless and capricious as she was ; but with all this there was no pretence at any tenderness, no slightest sign of one warmer feeling than the chill contemptuous obedience which she had ever shown ; and, though he had never feared the safety of the honour he had placed in her keeping, he hated himself and her for the folly that had laid it at her feet.

"Has she loved, or will she love ?" he asked himself often.

He did not think it was possible for a woman to go through life without one or other, and to his knowledge his wife had never felt tenderness for living man yet.

He went his own way now and she went hers ; but he knew her every action and followed her every occupation. He did not love her—he told himself that, but he believed in Fate, and he knew that sooner or later Fate would avenge him.

It had done so already, but that he could not know.

CHAPTER IX

O life ! thou art a galling load
Along a rough, a weary road.

Burns.

CECIL had been so long dead to all emotion, had so rigidly schooled himself to self-control, that he almost wondered at the agitation he experienced when he stood in one of the sitting-rooms at Meurice's, awaiting the arrival of his friend.

He could not sit still, he walked to and fro the length of the room with restless steps ; he gazed out of the windows on the busy throngs in the gardens of the Tuileries, seeing nothing of their life or motion. His thoughts were wild, eager, confused. The past ten years of silence and isolation seemed to roll away like a mist before the sun. Once more he only saw before him the world he had forsaken, and the hopes he had relinquished.

The sound of a firm quick step aroused him at last. He turned at the sound of the opening door, and there before him stood Vere Danvers. There was an instant's silence, then with one glad amazed exclamation Vere sprang forward and grasped his hands.

"Cecil ! Good Heavens ! is it *really* you ?"

"Really and truly," answered the younger man, his voice tremulous with strong emotion 'as he looked into the eyes that had not met his own for all these ten long weary years.

Men speak little when strongly moved. These two stood there, hand closed on hand, eyes meeting eyes, voices hoarse and choked by intense feeling, yet glad beyond all measure of gladness. Memory and friendship were so faithful still.

"I thought you were dead," said Lord Danvers, loosing his hands at last, and laughing somewhat constrainedly—there was something so like tears to hide by an appearance of hilarity. "My dear, dear old fellow, where have you hidden yourself all these years, and why have you never written to me?"

"It is a long story," answered Cecil, seating himself as he spoke. "Too long to tell," he added, somewhat embarrassed by that wondering and searching glance. "I had reasons, strong reasons, for wishing to live unknown to the world that had known me once. I——"

"But why to *me*, Cis?" asked Lord Danvers reproachfully. "You might have treated the world as you pleased, but surely our friendship deserved a little more consideration than you showed."

"It was not that I forgot you," said Cecil earnestly, "only it seemed to me best to cut myself adrift. If you knew all you would see I could not have acted otherwise. But I must ask you to trust me, Vere, for the sake of old times, and ask me nothing. It is not in my power to explain."

"You were the last sort of fellow in the world to have a mysterious secret," said his friend. "But no matter, tell me only just what you choose. I am too glad to see you again to cavil at anything you have done, or do. Why, do you know," he added, with his old frank hearty laughter, "for a time I really believed you had run off with Faustine, only she blossomed forth as Countess de Besançon, and I knew I was off the scent. Your people were abominably close, too. I could learn nothing from them except that you had gone off on one of your erratic expeditions. Well, no matter; that does not alter the fact of your turning up safe and sound again. By Jove, how *awfully* glad I am to see you!"

There was no doubting it. Cecil's heart leaped up with some of the old forgotten gladness at those hearty cordial words, at sight of the old familiar face so little changed.

"You are staying in Paris, I suppose?" continued Vere presently. "I hope you have put up here, it will be like old times again. I just ran over for the Easter recess. I am a busy man, you know, Cis, and my party have some critical work cut out for them just now."

"You have attained your ambition, I see," Cecil answered

with a grave smile. "I am heartily glad of it. I have followed your doings with great interest. But to return to myself. I am not staying in Paris. My sole business here is to see you and ask a favour at your hands—a favour not for myself, but for another."

"It is granted, of course. *Cela va sans dire*," interrupted Lord Danvers hastily. "But one question first, my dear fellow; you are unmarried still?"

"Yes—and you?"

"A confirmed old bachelor," laughed Lord Danvers. "Well, what is the mighty favour? I am all impatience to hear it."

"Is your mother still alive?" inquired Cecil.

"Yes, and hale and well as ever. The governor too."

"You remember the child I found and placed in the care of that sisterhood in the South of France?"

"Your waif of the woods? Most assuredly I remember her. Well?"

"She is about to leave the convent. I wish her to do so," said Cecil, speaking rapidly and earnestly now. "I cannot keep her with me, I lead such a wandering life. Will you use your influence with your mother to take the girl under her charge? She is accomplished and well educated. I have no single woman-friend of whom I could ask this favour, but I thought of you."

"As far as persuasion and will of mine go, consider the thing done," said Lord Danvers, cordially, as Cecil paused.

"You mean as companion, do you not, to read out, and find spectacles, and go out for walks and drives, and that sort of thing? And so your waif has actually grown up? What is she like?"

"She is very beautiful," said Cecil; "childish enough and innocent enough in heart and soul, but none the worse for that. She would be kindly and—pardon me—respectfully treated in your mother's household, I hope, Vere; she is proud as a young queen, and has been always made much of by the Superior and the sisters."

"My dear boy! my mother is the kindest soul breathing; if she takes a fancy to the girl you need have no fear on that score. She has had several companions, and they have all got married, and well married too. The *mater* is an inveterate matchmaker, and having no daughters of her own, employs the bent of her mind in providing for those of other people—matrimonially, of course."

"Marriage!" said Cecil with a start; somehow the idea seemed sacrilegious to him in connection with that pure and radiant youth, that innocent childlike life, he had protected

and watched over so long. "Oh, well, there is no need to trouble about *that* for years to come. As near as I can guess the girl is between fifteen and sixteen, but tall and womanly-looking for her years. Well, you have indeed set my mind at rest, Vere. A thousand thanks for it."

"You had better come over to England with me and see the *mater* yourself," suggested Lord Danvers. "She will be delighted to welcome you to Calsthorpe. You know you were always a great favourite of hers."

"To England? Oh no," exclaimed Cecil, hastily, "I have no wish to go there ever again."

"Why the deuce not?" demanded Lord Danvers, regarding him with unfeigned amazement. "What has the country done to you that you give it the cold shoulder in so odd a fashion? One would think you were a criminal fleeing from justice."

"Perhaps I am," said Cecil coldly, "or from something as bad."

"There was no insanity in your family that I ever heard of," remarked Lord Danvers, regarding him with a curious and intent gaze, "but for the life of me, Cis, I cannot make you out, or fathom the mystery of your actions during the past ten years. Can you not trust even me? Dear old fellow, you know there is nothing, *nothing* in this world that could alter my friendship for you. Men don't talk about their feelings as women do, but I think you know *that*."

"Indeed I do," said Cecil earnestly. "But I cannot give you my confidence on this one subject, Vere. I can only ask you to trust me and believe that if a time ever comes when I can speak of it, you shall hear all."

"Of course. I have no right to ask for your confidence," answered Lord Danvers. "And you should certainly be the best judge of your own actions. Only you were the frankest, most open-hearted fellow in the world once, and I confess I am puzzled as to what can have changed you."

That cold bitter smile, so new to Cecil's lips in the memory of his friend, curled them once again.

"I daresay you are puzzled; doubtless my conduct seems more than strange," he said. "But I am a lonely exiled man, Danvers, and the world we both knew of in the old days knows nothing of me now, perhaps never will again."

"But this sounds like rank folly," exclaimed Lord Danvers. "What *can* you mean? Did you have a row with Malden? He never speaks of you, I know, and his wife is simply an atrocity. Still they are your relations, and Strathayon is your home, in a way, and——"

' Strathavon," interrupted Cecil passionately. "Ah, Heaven, what I would not give to see it again!" ,

"And why can't you?"

He shook his head.

"Unless a miracle takes place I never shall. Do not pursue the subject further, Vere, it only distresses me, and looks like want of confidence to yourself. Tell me of yourself, your hopes, your successes. That is a more welcome subject."

Vere Danvers looked at him with clouded brow and thoughtful eyes. He saw how painfully changed was the friend he had loved with more than a brother's love; he felt pained and perplexed at his strange words and stranger conduct. He could not comprehend what could have happened thus to force him into a voluntary exile, and debar him from all that was his right.

Cecil met that sad and anxious gaze, and a sudden wave of colour rose to his brow. Involuntarily he rose and stretched out his hand.

"It is not that I do not trust you, Vere," he said earnestly; "you know—you *must* know that. It is only that dishonour has come to me when I least expected it, and until I can justify myself I will say nothing."

"And your silence has lasted ten years, Cis! What sort of years, dear old fellow? Can I not at least help you in some way? Life can have been no easy thing for you, I fear. One look at your face told me that."

A momentary quiver shook Cecil's lips. It was hard to resist the pleading of the one friend he had loved and still loved best in all the world.

"A thousand thanks, I am well enough now," he said hurriedly and with evident emotion. "If I had needed help at any time you may rest assured I would have sent to you."

"I am glad you say that," answered Lord Danvers simply, as he also rose and stood before his friend, looking down at his face with a smile soft and tender as a woman's. "And now, as you say, we will drop the subject. Whether your stay here be long or short, hours or days, remember you are my guest. *That* I insist on. You will not grudge me so small a favour after these long blank years of silence and separation."

And Cecil, looking back to the face of his boyhood's friend, and feeling how cold and empty his heart was, had neither will nor power now to refuse the request.

"As you will," he said huskily. "For to-day I am at your service entirely."

CHAPTER X.

Yet love, mere love is beautiful indeed
And worthy of acceptance.—*E. B. Browning.*

As the hours wore on, as with the keen sight of a love, faithful and deep-rooted as few loves are, Lord Danvers watched his friend, he saw more and more how changed he was, and marvelled with yet more troubled wonder at the cause of such change.

A silence as of the grave had fallen between Cecil and himself for all these years, and the mystery seemed destined to be unexplained. His own career had been one to satisfy even his early ambition. Success had ever waited on his efforts, and he was recognised not only as an able politician, but as a master of statecraft and a skilled orator. The life had for him a resistless fascination, and to it he gave all his energies and all his talents.

Again and again Cecil returned to this subject, again and again he listened with eager attention and ready sympathy to the account of his friend's career of triumph, but of himself he would not speak, a strange veil of reticence and sadness fell between the once perfect confidence of their friendship like an impalpable shadow that cast its gloom over the brightness of reunion.

"You cannot give me the slip again, Cis," said Lord Danvers as they sat at dinner that evening. "Your waif will be a bond between us now. You will want to hear of her welfare, you know. And so you are determined to settle in Rome?"

"Yes, I shall not set foot in England again unless——"

He paused abruptly and looked down to avoid his friend's glance of anxious inquiry.

"Unless?" suggested Lord Danvers.

"Well, a miracle happens, and the age has gone by for that."

"You have become as unintelligible as the sphinx," laughed his friend. "I don't think foreign life has improved you. I shall run over to Rome in the winter and look you up in your retreat. Will you admit me?"

"On one condition."

"Good Heavens—what is that?"

"You may jest as you please, but I am in sober, serious earnest. I wish my address kept a secret from everyone. I wish you to mention nothing of this meeting to anyone who has known or still remembers me."

"Not even your brothers?" interrupted Vere Danvers hastily.

"No, not to any living soul. I have strong reasons for making this request, and for the sake of old times I hope you will grant it."

"You need not doubt that, my dear fellow, puzzled as I am about yourself and your doings. You were the last man in the world, Cis, I should have expected to play so eccentric a part."

A shadow crossed Cecil's face.

"We none of us know what we may become," he answered wearily; "as for understanding me now, I can scarcely expect you to do that. We look at life through different glasses; mine are dark and smoke-coloured, yours clear with success and brightened by content."

"Content!" murmured Lord Danvers, leaning lazily back and slowly draining the glass of sparkling wine he raised to his lips. "Am I content? Are any of us that, I wonder? I fancy not. Ambition has many goals, and each individual heart marks out its own pathway to their attainment; but when all is said and done are we one whit the happier?"

"Are not you?"

"I think I have never been happy in my life, Cis. Not that it is so extraordinary a confession. It is old as the world itself, old as the sorrows it bears."

"Only that there are different degrees of sorrow as there are of happiness, unless that word be a misnomer after all. Perhaps there are only relative degrees of suffering or enjoyment to which we have given these names. It is merely by comparison we know whether our respective joys or sorrows are greater or less than those of our fellow-mortals."

"Well, here's some of the former to you!" said Lord Danvers, draining his glass. "And now, are you still inexorable; do you insist on leaving here to-night?"

"I must. How soon can you hear from your mother?"

"In about three days' time I expect her decision. Why can't you stop in Paris, most provoking of mortals, until the letter comes?"

"I am going to stay near Félise," said Cecil gravely. "I have my doubts of Père Jerome, and I wish to keep the child under my own eye."

"You and the father are still foes as of old, then?"

"Foes!"

The flash in Cecil's eyes, the dark wave of colour that burned in his cheek, spoke out a sure, fierce, personal hate that time had not deadened or lulled to rest.

As Vere Danvers saw that fierce emotion, as he read in the

eyes of his friend the secret of this hatred, a sudden light seemed to break upon him, a momentary fear chilled his heart. He looked at the changed face, he saw the dark workings of a vengeful passion in the lofty mind of old.

"It is Père Jerome's work," he said to himself. "He is at the bottom of this mystery."

And with the thought came a strange dread, for the look in Cecil Calverley's eyes was the look of one who thirsts for vengeance over wrong, and will take it unsparingly when fate places it in his hands.

"Your life will never own a bitterer foe," he had said to him once, in those far-off years whose memory he still loved. Had his words come true? Had their meaning been verified? He fancied so at this moment, as he remembered the hatred that from his boyhood upwards had been borne to Cecil Calverley by the man whose name had just been uttered.

Cecil Calverley took up his quarters in the farmhouse where he had stayed before, and from early morning till late evening Félise and he were together. The girl's delight was radiant and heartfelt. Never in all these years had she spent such hours of pure and perfect enjoyment as those she spent now with Cecil. It seemed as if the whole love of her nature, its dreamy fancies, its passionate faith, its tender reverence had been spent upon her guardian, and the rarity of his visits to herself had but intensified these feelings and invested him with a romantic charm that grew with her growth and ripened with her years.

The enchanted hours she spent with him now were only saddened by one regret—the thought that soon the mandate of parting must be spoken, that she must go to the home he had provided for her in a strange land and only see him again for those brief intervals of his leisure which he could spare to her from time to time. The obedience in which she had been reared, and the implicit confidence she had in Cecil, kept her from outwardly murmuring against his decision; but she grieved sorely over it, and felt that she must be wretchedly unhappy, despite the picture he drew of her new home and the friends she would meet.

Three days had passed since Cecil left Paris. On the fourth came the letter he had been expecting from Lord Danvers. He tore it open with a certain impatience foreign to his usual calmness and composure. It contained a few cordial graceful lines from the Marchioness of Clevedon, assuring him of her perfect sympathy with his difficulties respecting the little foundling, and offering to receive her at Calsthorpe as soon as ever he could bring her.

Cecil was surprised that the momentary relief afforded by those words, that the certainty of a sure and fitting home for the young fair life he had cherished and guarded, should be succeeded by a feeling of disappointment. Yet it was the case. He put the letter aside with a sigh and went out into the glad and radiant glow of the morning sunlight. He knew it would not be long ere the child came to him.

Shading his eyes from the sun, he stood leaning over the low gate and watched for the first glimpse of the graceful lithe young figure, that would so soon be in sight.

He had not long to wait. With that glad free step of perfect youth and freedom from all touch or taint of care, the young girl came swiftly towards him. It was so new to her to see him watching for her that she hastened her already eager speed, and was beside him in a moment.

Cecil greeted her as tenderly as usual, then bade her go to the house and ask the woman for a basket of provisions.

"We will spend our day in the woods," he said; "but we must have some food. Run in and see what you can coax out of old Nannette."

The girl ran off, laughing merrily. A day in the woods—a spring day with its glories of sunshine, and scent of flowers, and sweet-blowing winds, and budding blossoms, and babble of cool streams among newly-opened fronds of ferns and freshly-springing grasses! What could hold such endless delight, what thrill her glad young heart with such a prospect of enjoyment as such a day with him? She might have had all the sunlight and flower-scents, and music of wind and waters to herself, but that would not have been the same. Instinctively she felt that, but the reason she could not have told.

Cecil was not going to spoil her enjoyment by any hint of that coming parting. He knew—from what he had seen of her, and from what she had said—that the fact of impending separation was capable of saddening her brightest moods. For to-day he resolved she should be happy, as happy as he could make her; and the sweetest purest pleasure his life held now was to hear her innocent confession of his power to do that.

To-day she seemed the very incarnation of the spring itself, lovely, radiant, joyous, changeable; now glad, now grave—now gay, now thoughtful—now amusing him with her childishness, now startling him with a profundity of feeling, a gravity of thought strangely beyond her years and foreign to his experience. So the day passed, and in the soft cool dusk, as they wended their way homeward through the wood, he knew that he must at last speak to her of the news he had received that morning.

"Félise," he said gently, "I have something to tell you."

The quick start, the sudden pained glance as her eyes sought his, told him that her fears had grasped the truth.

She turned very white, her face seemed to lose all the lovely warmth and light that had shone on it the long day through, her lips quivered like a child's as she stood silently there in woodland shadows, arrested by his words, and only conscious of the doom they spoke.

"Something? Ah, I know," she said sadly. "You have heard from England?"

"Yes, and the lady I spoke of will gladly receive you, and offers you a very safe and very happy home."

"Happy!" The word fell from her lips almost involuntarily. Tears gathered in her eyes but did not fall. He drew her gently down beside him, to a seat afforded by the trunk of a tree, and not daring to look at the lovely troubled face began to speak to her very gently and calmly of his solicitude for her welfare, his hopes for her future, of all that lay before her in the coming years which his care might still guard and his protection still enfold.

The girl listened silently, but the look of wondering pain in her eyes deepened, and the old petulant incredulity spoke out in her words. "If you love me, if you care for what makes me happy, why do you send me away to strangers? You know I can never care for them as I do for you. I would work, would do anything for you, if you would only take me to your home and let me live there. No one can ever be so kind to me as you have been, and there is no one else in the world I love like you!"

The innocent impulsive words fell on Cecil's heart like a shower that revives the sun-parched earth after the drought of burning summer days. They woke in him a sudden passion of tenderness, a feeling of regret, an involuntary longing for some of the joy and sweetness of life, so long denied, so long unknown; for he knew she had spoken with the innocence of a child, with the heartfelt candid openness that had learnt no concealment from the teaching of the world, and for one wild moment he longed to take her at her word; to keep her to himself; to teach her the lesson that was as yet hidden between the folded leaves of childhood, and bid her love him as women love. Her fate lay in his hands, he had but to speak, to brush off the bloom of her unconscious adoration, to bid her see in the idol of her young dreams the lover of her girlhood, to gather the beautiful bud in its scarce-opened sweetness, and see it blossom into perfection beneath the sun of passion.

But even as the thought crossed his mind he repelled it. Either passion was dead in him, or it had been all spent and poured out in a flood of burning, idolatrous worship at the feet of one woman, never to revive or return at the bidding of another.

The child was utterly at his mercy ; his will was her law. She would have followed him to the world's end, had he bidden her do so ; but she was so ignorant of her own danger, so unconscious of the real nature of her feelings, that it would have seemed to him the basest and cruellest wrong to have taken advantage of the one or the other.

"It cannot be, dear," he said very gravely, breaking the silence of these troubled thoughts at last. "You are too young to understand ; you do not know what the world would say of me—what even you yourself might say in years to come. My child, can you not trust me as you have always done ? It is only of your welfare I think."

The mournful rebuke touched her to the quick. With a swift impulse she threw herself at his feet on the soft green-sward and seized his hands.

"Forgive me ; I have no right to rebel against your wishes. You have been everything to me ; it is to you I owe my life. Only, to leave you now, you do not know how hard it seems !"

A sob choked the words, the bright head was bent on his knees, and he felt the warm tears falling on the hands she clasped.

"Do not cry," said Cecil gently. The sight of that impulsive grief touched him deeply. "Do not cry, my child, or I shall think you are unhappy. As you grow to womanhood you will see more clearly the meaning of my actions now. It is not because I would not wish to keep you with me that I send you away ; far from it. It is only because though you are alone and I am alone, and both of us are friendless, yet I am not justified in taking advantage of your ignorance and friendlessness ; and if I conceded to your desires I should be doing that."

"How ? I—I do not understand."

She had raised her head, and with one hand pushed back the soft masses of hair from off her brow as she looked at him, the tears still trembling on her lashes, the flush of excited feeling still burning on either cheek.

Cecil smiled down on the beautiful face half sadly, half tenderly.

"No," he said, "you do not understand. It is as well. You will learn soon enough ; too soon, perhaps. The world makes laws for women and for men, and I should be break-

ing one of those laws did I keep you by my side when no tie binds your life to mine, and to the mystery of your birth I added the shame of unmerited reproach."

She looked at him with a little sense of fear dawning on her mind. Had her wishes been wrong? Was she in some way a burden—a trouble to him? A flush of sudden pride came into her cheeks, she rose from her kneeling attitude, and stood before him.

"Whatever you wish, I will do," she said gravely. "I fear I have been always an anxiety and a trouble to you. I—I am sorry if I have. Perhaps, after all, it would have been better had you left me to perish in the woods. I seem no use; no one wants me—not even you!"

The words stung him more bitterly than he could have believed. Involuntarily he rose from his seat and stretched out his arms with a gesture of tenderness.

"My child, do not speak so, you pain me. I never thought to hear such words from your lips. I am a lonely, unhappy man myself, but my one pleasure has been to know the young life I guarded was happy, sheltered, safe. Heaven keep it so through the years to come; it is my only prayer for you."

She looked at him, then her eyes sank, her lips quivered, she shrank away from his arms as they sought to draw her to his heart in the old fond embrace of her childhood.

"You are very good," she said unsteadily, and with a sound as of tears in the clear sweet voice. "Perhaps, some day, when I am wiser, cleverer, and know more than I do now, I shall be able to thank you better, to show you some of the gratitude I feel. I have only been a cost and a trouble to you, I feel sure——"

"Never, never, *never* that!" he broke in impetuously. "If it had not been for you I should have been sick and weary of life long ago, my darling!"

Something in the tenderness of his voice thrilled to her heart, and made it throb with a sudden vivid joy, unlike any it had ever known.

The twilight had fallen, the shadows from the bending boughs fell heavily around them. As Cecil looked at the fair flushed face, the downcast eyes, a sigh parted his lips. Some of the dreams of his past, the softness of youthful fancies stole back to him and revived for one fleeting moment the hopes he had thought were dead for ever.

He came a step nearer and gazed down at the beautiful troubled face. "Who knows what the future may bring forth?" he murmured gently; "who knows, *Félice*, but that a day may come when I shall utter the prayer to you that

you have spoken to me? What would your answer be, I wonder?"

He had drawn her to his breast, and the words fell almost unconsciously from his lips. She gave one quick startled glance up at his face, and their eyes met. A sudden alarm, a fear both sweet and painful, quivered through the girl's young heart. As his lips touched her own they seemed to thrill her with a new and rapturous delight. The colour burned like flame upon her cheeks, and she trembled in his arms like a captured bird. As suddenly Cecil released her, as he had folded her to his heart. He remembered—too late.

He read the signs; he felt as a criminal at the first conviction of guilt. "My God!" he said below his breath, "what have I done?"

Only taught her what he had deemed the world might teach; only forgotten his own resolves, and startled away her dreaming peace for ever.

Silently, and with the bitterness of a great remorse, he walked home beside her, through the soft haze of starlight. Both of them were troubled; to neither of them would come again the serene peace and content of the past years. The colour came and went in the girl's face; her eyes never once looked back to his. So many times had he kissed her; but never once had this wild shy fear, this sweet shameful joy thrilled to her heart at the touch of his lips.

And he? He scarcely knew what he felt, save anger with himself for so inconsiderate an impulse, and fear for her now that she knew her secret. For that she knew it he did not doubt. The woman to whom a man's caress brings a flush of shame, a throb of heart, is no longer innocent or unconscious.

It had been but the softness of compassion, the impulse of tenderness, the waking of past regrets that he had given to her; and she—she had given him Love.

CHAPTER XI

THE TWO SHADOWS

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well—
Treason has none his work.—*Shakespeare.*

It was midnight in Paris. Stars shone softly bright in the dim blue of the sky that stretched above the great city's expanse, and the moonlight silvered all the stately heights of churches, and buildings, and columns, and gleamed on the

trees budding into fresh green verdure along the boulevards, on streets winding serpentlike through the city's length and breadth; on the cool dark waters, flowing under arch and bridge.

In a narrow street, in one of the darkest byways, was a very dirty, tumbledown-looking house, and in a room of that house two men were sitting engaged in close and earnest conversation. The yellow gaslight fell on the face of one—the smooth, dark, inscrutable face of Père Jerome. His companion was a poorly-dressed and middle-aged man; his face thin and careworn, his manner nervous and furtive, and almost abject in its deference to the priest.

"And this is all you know?" Père Jerome was saying.

"All, monsieur."

"The case grows complicated," murmured the priest dreamily. "How to secure the packet is the question. On no account must it reach Lord Danvers."

"It is already on its way, monsieur."

"I know, I know; but it can be stopped. There are ways. Listen, Carlo. You know this messenger by sight; he knows nothing of you. There you have the advantage. He started for England to-night: fool! he was in too great haste over his errand. Lord Danvers is in Paris at this moment. Had the man but waited, had he even seen a newspaper in a café, he would have learnt that. But Fortune favours us. Now attend. At all costs this packet must be in my hands. By fair means or foul you must get it. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, monsieur," said the man with a faint shudder.

"I leave the means to yourself," continued the priest. "You have served us well before this, and can do so again. Remember, it is *imperative*!"

The look more than the words seemed to cow and terrify the tool. He bent his head in answer while his lips quivered and paled beneath the menace that flashed from the priest's dark eyes. A slight laugh escaped Père Jerome.

"Do not come to me with any excuses," he said as tranquilly as if he were ordering his dinner. "I place no limit on the force you exercise, but I will hear no such word as *fail*. You know you are in my hands as completely as yonder fly is meshed in that spider's web. Escape you cannot. You tried it once, and you know the consequences. Go where you will; do what you please; but though you fled to the farthest ends of the earth, my hand should reach you when my will desired it."

There was something in the merciless tranquillity of the

voice more frightful than the fiercest threat. It sounded so chill, so inexorable, and the hunted shuddering creature looked at the pitiless face and turned paler still.

"You shall be obeyed, monsieur," he muttered below his breath. "The packet shall be in your hands. Are these all your orders?"

"For the present, yes. The girl I spoke of is safely established at Calsthorpe, you say?"

"Yes, monsieur; she arrived a week ago under the care of a sister from the convent."

"That is well. The time is not yet ripe for dealing with her. You are sure you have not forgotten one word of the Englishman's injunctions to her when they parted at Calais?"

"Quire sure, monsieur. 'See no one, hold communication with no one with whom the marchioness, or I are unacquainted. Keep me informed of all your doings. Be happy as you can, and, if anything troubles you, or any sorrow comes to you, which God forbid, remember I am your guardian still.'"

"Your memory does you credit, Carlo. Yes, that is just what I have written down; and then they parted. He returned to Rome, and she, under Lord Danvers' protection, travelled to England. Quite satisfactory. Now here is the money for your expenses. The fourth night from this, at the same hour, I shall expect you."

"I will be here, monsieur. And—but one word more—the child, she is well?"

"Of course she is well. She never ails anything."

"And I may see her soon? Ah, monsieur, you promised."

"My good Carlo, you ought to be superior to such weakness as mere paternal affection. You will never succeed in life until you exile everything like sentiment from your heart. It always contrives to interfere with material advantages. Yes, you shall see her without doubt—when I have done with you."

Something in the blanched agony, the intense suffering of the man's face, as he heard the doom of future misery spoken out by those words, might have touched any heart that was not of stone.

It did not touch Père Jerome's.

When the man was at last alone he threw himself face downwards on the bare and dusty floor of that miserable room. His hands clenched on the dark thick curls of his head, and wrung them as if he could have torn them out by the roots. A stifled groan escaped his lips, he would have liked to end his life then and there; but even in death he

peace could come to him, for, reared in superstitious idolatry, and linked to crime and wrong, he but beheld all the tortures of the damned awaiting him in that dread hereafter.

Then as suddenly as he had flung himself down so suddenly he arose, all rebellion and despair cowed and beaten into the weakness of submission.

"For her sake, for her sake," he murmured again and again, as he moved to and fro, making hurried preparations for his journey. "Oh, my child! the one thing that keeps a spark of love or hope within my heart, shall I ever hold you in my arms again?"

The moonlight, that had shone so calm and clear above the lofty spires of Paris, shone the next night with equal lustre over a broad white road, that wound through sloping villages and tiny hamlets, and lost itself amidst dense woods, that led to the stately terraces and Gothic gates of Calsthorpe, the seat of the Marquis of Clevedon.

It shone on the road, and on two figures, whose shadows crossed it at intervals.

One walked rapidly and fearlessly along, a song or a whistle sounding from time to time across the stillness of the night; the other walked warily and cautiously, keeping under shadow of the hedgerows and glancing from time to time with angry and impatient eyes at the clear and pitiless rays of the moonlight as they fell on the deserted road and on the unconscious form that knew nothing of an approaching doom. Had he known, would his step have been so light, his heart so fearless? Would he have smiled to himself as he walked along, humming softly at intervals a little careless song?

"I shall soon be there," he thought. It will be a weight off my mind, thank God!"

A weight off his mind! Would he have thanked God that thus he went on in blind ignorance of the fate he tempted? Had he a wrong to forgive, a sin to repent, a tender thought of one he loved, a memory of years gone by? Had he any or all of these in his heart as from the moonlit road he stepped aside into the darker shadows of the wood and took a bridle path through the park as he had been directed?

A frank, careless, bold young life, a life that had deemed itself free from enmity, undogged by evil, and yet with a shadow of both following step by step, creeping stealthily along a little nearer and a little nearer. A shadow that, silent as death and relentless as doom, passed into the darkness of the woods—a shadow from which that pure soft light

might surely have had its beams, and from which the very birds, as they roosted in the branches of the trees, might have shrunk and quivered, so evil was its look, so awful was its presage.

The softly-stirring wind, the shining stars, the rustle of the herbage, the flutter of leaf or bough, were there none of them to warn or whisper, to startle or prepare? Not one.

The eye of night was upon the two figures as they passed into the wood, the eye of night was upon *one* only who left it—left it with shuddering glance, and white wild face and trembling limbs that scarce could bear him, now that speed was so imperative a thing.

The blood in his veins ran cold and dead, yet not so cold and dead as that which lay on the dewy grass, with white face turned to Heaven, and all the glory and beauty of life snatched from it by one ruthless stroke. The mute appeal of the sightless eyes cried out to that Heaven for justice. The crimson stream that slowly, slowly, trickled from the silent figure poured itself along the grass, bathing the closed eyes of the daisies and the tender roots of the sweet wild flowers. Had these no voice to condemn, no hands to point out the track of the assassin? Alas, no!

The shadow passed on—fear winged its steps and desperation lent it courage. But ever in its ears rang a stifled cry, and ever before its eyes lived that one dark solitary spot in the heart of the silent woods, where, amidst the hush of night and the starlit glory of its beauty, the Dead cried to Heaven for vengeance on a murderer.

On, on with steps winged by fear, and eyes that read in every face an accusation; on, while night passed through shadow to sunlight; on, while the radiance of the day steeped earth and heaven in splendour; on, while that radiance grew more dismal than any darkness, and the sun seemed waking all the world to gaze upon a crime; on, to hear the sea beating and dashing by the steamer's side as it ploughed its way through the waters of the Channel, and amidst the noise of the waves hear also that one faint imploring cry for mercy; on, with the rush of steam and the noise of the panting engines and the hoarse cries of men; on, till the great, vile, beautiful city closed him once again in the shelter of arms as guilty as his own, and terror died away before a momentary feeling of safety.

He stood in his own room, the little dusky dingy den, from whence had issued that mandate which had hounded him on to crime. He threw on the table before him the sealed and folded packet for which a life had paid the penalty. He buried his face in his hands and cursed the name of the man,

who had been his destroyer. Before his closed eyes came again that scene, burnt into his brain and into his memory in blood-red letters. Had they found it yet? Had the pitiless sun shone down upon that hollow where the bending ferns were dyed with a dark and cruel stain? He shuddered now, as he seemed again to feel its touch upon his hands, as before his eyes seemed spread a crimson cloud that dyed all the radiance of the sunny day, and reached from earth to heaven.

Dread and fear—the coward's portion and the crime's avenger—these were all he knew now. The gold that paid his work, and the sweetness of one promise that rewarded it, were as nothing in that moment.

Through the long silent hours he sat there, in that same dull stupor, waiting—waiting—not for the news of discovery, but the presence of the man who had been the evil genius of his life, and who, too wise to sin against the law, put the weapon into the hands of such tools as himself, and smiled as he lured them on to ruin.

Who was the greater sinner of the two?

BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

The heart's division divideth us.—*Swinburne*.

THE Countess de Besançon sat alone in her boudoir; her fair face very weary, her eyes troubled and sad.

"He hates me, of course he hates me. What else could I expect," she was saying to herself; "and yet could he not have come—just once?"

It is always hard for a woman to believe that a man who has once loved her, can be absolutely cold and indifferent to her attractions. Faustine looked at herself now as she lay back on her low chair, soft folds of lace and muslin shrouding her beautiful figure, the rippling luxuriance of her bright hair falling over her shoulders like a mantle, the old resistless witchery of her face scarce dimmed by touch of time. All this had moved him once, had bent him like a reed to her will, and now—was it nothing?

Day by day she had watched for his coming, hoping against hope that he would do so; but all in vain. He had made no sign of ever remembering her presence. Then, in despair, she had spoken to Lord Danvers, only to receive the

information that Cécil had left Paris the day following their meeting.

She could scarcely believe it for a moment; but as the truth came home to her, her heart felt cold as lead in her breast. He must despise her so utterly; he had so plainly avoided her, and she—all these long and weary years, how she had hoped for sight of his face, for news of his welfare. Great tears glistened on her lashes now as she thought of his changed face, his altered appearance, from which all the youthfulness and buoyancy, that had held for her so great a charm, seemed fled. It could not have been all her work surely? And yet, what mystery was about his life, had been about it these ten years past?

She could not tell and could not learn. She sat there quite motionless, leaning her cheek on her hand, and her heart throbbed as it had done at sight of him; a thrill of new warm life rushed through her veins. It was but momentary, that emotion. Too soon the old chill feeling returned. Pride came to her aid and whispered of the folly of the past, the worse than folly of the present. She dashed the tears from her eyes, and, with a flush on her cheek, roused herself from this trance of remembrance, and rang for her maids to make her toilette for the evening.

Amusements and distractions enough awaited her. In these days of the Second Empire, society was not too exclusive, and her beauty and her rank had carried her triumphantly along the sea of fashion; but neither amusement, nor society, nor admiration pleased her to-night. The voices sounded harsh and wearisome beyond endurance, the lights of the brilliant rooms flashed and glittered before her tired eyes; the smiles on her lips were forced and unnatural.

Had he passed out of her life again for ever? That was the question she asked herself again and again, while the gay crowds moved about and the sound of music and laughter rose and fell on the perfumed air. She seemed to grow dizzy and faint beneath the fear of the thought. She had not known how entirely empty her life had been until that moment when she had seen the one man that in all the world of men around her she had ever loved, or for whom her heart had held one throb of tenderness. Now he had passed from it again, it suddenly seemed to grow cold, dreary, tedious beyond description, and do what she would, she could not for one single moment forget him, or cease to hear the echo of his voice, cold and changed as it had sounded in her ears.

An hour after midnight she returned home. As she

swept up the softly-carpeted stairs to her own apartments a servant handed her a letter.

"It was to be given to madame immediately on her return," he said respectfully.

She glanced at the superscription and turned a shade paler. She did not break the seal until she was alone. Then she read the few lines, and tore the letter into tiny fragments and tossed them into the bright wood fire that burned upon the hearth.

"What does he need of me now?" she murmured. "Oh, my God! shall I never, never know what freedom is?"

The noon of the next day was at its height when she came into her boudoir to meet the writer of that message. They had not met for years. After to-day they might not meet again for an equally long space of time, but she knew all the same that the merciless force of this man's power was about her life till it should end. That go where she might, do what she pleased, this chain was wound about all the years of her future as it had been in all the years of her past.

Calm, courtly, genial as ever the priest rose to greet her.

"Welcome, my daughter," he said, in his sweet and gentle tones. "It is long since we met, is it not?"

"Yes," she answered coldly, as she sank into a seat and glanced at the calm inscrutable face before her. "You have not *required* me, I suppose, holy father?"

He looked quickly at her. His ears detected the change in her voice that her face never betrayed.

"Your insinuation is not a complimentary one, Madame de Besançon," he answered. "Our long friendship and my great interest in your welfare might have led you to a more flattering construction of my words. I have heard of you, I have watched over you from afar with true paternal interest. I simply have not intruded myself upon your life because I desired that that life should taste the full enjoyment the world could give. You have been rich, courted, successful, admired, and I have left you free to taste of all these delights. You craved them dearly once. Well, I gained them for you. You might at least be grateful."

"Grateful!" the unutterable contempt with which that word was spoken, brought a sudden flash of anger into Père Jerome's eyes.

"You are *not* grateful. Well, you are a woman, and like all your sex find no charm in what is once attained. But no matter. Had I listened to you when you prayed me to let you enter a convent I wonder what you would have said to me now. I told you it was a foolish whim; that a woman

with your beauty, your acumen, your talents, would hold a far wider empire than you dreamed of in your youth, and to condemn such powers to eternal seclusion would be really anything but serving Heaven. You have brought us more converts——”

“And wealth,” she interposed, with that ironic bitterness that so irritated him.

“Done us more service, and gained for yourself wider power, than even the highest dignities of the Church could have bestowed on you,” he went on, unheeding her interruption.

“I hardly suppose you have come here to tell me all this, monsieur, or shall I say, your——”

“Hush!” he said, with a warning glance around. “*That* is not known yet. I have my own reasons for wishing it to remain a secret. The rank I hold now is the reward of services I have rendered to the Church. But I have some work still to accomplish, the issue of a scheme so delicate and intricate that I dare trust it to no other hands. It is for this I require your co-operation, and to secure it I have sought you to-day.”

The beautiful face grew a shade paler. Some memory of a past long stripped of its glamour, of evil done under the cloak of good, of persuasions to which she had yielded, of sins to which she had been betrayed, came back to her now. She looked at him with a strange dread, and yet with something of disdain, in the haughty challenge of her glance.

“What is it you need?”

“I wish you to give up your season in Paris and start at once for Rome.”

“For Rome! But—my husband?”

“Your husband, my daughter! Do you mean to tell me a woman cannot persuade her husband into doing what *she* wishes? Chut! you have a hundred excuses; your health, your physician's orders, your own wishes; nay, your husband will be the least obstacle in the way.”

“But—at this season—it is so strange a time to go to Rome.”

She rose restlessly and walked towards the window doubtful and embarrassed.

“You do not care for the mission, I see,” said Père Jerome tranquilly, as he watched every shade of expression on her changing face. “Perhaps you will object less when I tell you, you will meet an old friend there, a friend in whose welfare we are *both* interested.”

She turned quickly round and faced him.

“What do you mean?” she asked hurriedly.

“I mean that Mr. Cecil Calverley is living there under a feigned name, and I wish you to keep me informed of his

doings, and above all see that he does not leave the city without my being immediately acquainted with it."

A burning flush swept slowly up to her very brows. A sense of sickening, unutterable shame oppressed her. After his too evident avoidance of herself to follow him so palpably, to seem to seek when he had only desired to avoid. The intense disgust of an intolerable humiliation burned like fire into her heart. She faced her companion with sudden defiance.

"Bid me do anything but *that*! I cannot go—to Rome!"

"And why?" his voice was as calm as ever, but there was a look in his eyes that seemed suddenly to chill and terrify, and all the colour died out of her face, and the defiance out of her eyes, and she shivered as she stood before him. He was her master—she had forgotten that.

"You can have no tender reminiscences surely after all these years?" he continued ironically. "Women's memories are not so faithful, and such a woman as yourself must long have forgotten a boyish lover who would have ruined himself at her bidding. I wish you to do him no harm. Only I must know of his actions, and if possible I wish you to meet him again, and become friends. You understand?"

"I understand."

Her voice was tranquil as his own now, but as he looked at her face he felt a thrill of something like fear, it spoke a despair so great, a rebuke so bitter.

In a way he loved to rule and bend her, all the more so in that her nature was not easy to coerce or intimidate. He held her now in a grip of steel, and felt a savage exultation in the fact, and yet, even amidst his triumph, that momentary fear he had so often felt of her, stole suddenly, chillingly over him. He knew her pride rebelled, her instincts recoiled from this enforced obedience; and, despite his tyranny there was something in this woman that had always wrung from him an unwilling homage, and made him dread her censure even when he defied it.

"If you understand, there is no more to be said between us," he murmured graciously. "I will give you full instructions in our usual cipher. As for Monsieur *le mari*, I must leave you to manage him. I should scarcely fear your eloquence has deserted you. Like your beauty, it must be potent as ever at your will."

"My beauty——!" A laugh, bitter and chilling as her own despair, escaped her mocking lips. "Ah, Heaven, if only I had been the unsightliest of the feminine things that men make their toys, I might at least have escaped the degradation of—to-day!"

He smiled coldly.

"You speak foolishly, my daughter." Believe me, there is no such gift as beauty, no such power as that it wields. You at least should not complain, for it has given you an empire vast enough from the days of your youth."

"Do not speak of *that*," she interrupted passionately. "Youth, what youth, was mine? What peace was I allowed? what innocence or beauty of girlhood was spared to me? There seems no time when I was not a slave, a tool, a thing caressed and cursed alternately by those I fooled and betrayed. The one being I loved was Valerie, and you know her fate; and then you turned my own despair into a fouler passion than the one it clamoured to avenge, and with your promises led me on and on a road of degradation, until I grew to loathe myself for the thing I seemed. Youth—if there be pity or justice in heaven, they might compassionate such a youth as mine, and angels blot its records with their tears."

Her lips quivered, a passion of emotion choked her voice, and in her eyes was a deeper woe than tears could bring. Stung, outraged, helpless, she writhed in that merciless grasp, all the strength and pride in her revolting with unutterable loathing. He only looked at her with smiling eyes. Her words had but lashed all that was most evil in him to its height.

"What a superb *tragédienne* the world has lost in you by your marriage!" he said tranquilly; "Rachel herself could scarcely have delivered that impromptu speech better."

The fire and wrath died out of her face; only in her eyes gleamed a world of suppressed passion, and her hands clenched as though she would have liked to silence his taunts as a man might have done.

"A *tragédienne*," she muttered. "Well, why not? It is not yet too late; I may go back to my old life again. It holds at least excitement and endless occupation. Some day I may be tempted to do it, to cast aside these empty baubles, and face the world on my own merits."

"I don't think I would, though," said the priest coldly. "You know there are always the *siffleurs* to fear. You might have to face them as Valerie did, and her merits were equally as strong as yours."

Her very lips turned white. She covered her face with her hands, and sank back into her seat. Her emotion seemed to touch him. He rose and approached her, and his voice sank to its gentlest and most persuasive tones.

"My daughter, surely we need not quarrel, you and I. You must try and be reasonable. I do not ask any great thing of you after all. It is surely better you should have this duty than one less scrupulous than yourself, is it not?"

"It is shameful, hateful!" she cried, amidst the convulsive sobs that now shook her frame. "I do not know what lies beyond what I have undertaken. It is not the first time you have led me blindfold." But after all why should I be led? I will *not* do this thing—do you hear? *I will not.* For the first time since you have commanded my actions, I refuse obedience!"

She had dashed the tears away, and stood facing him in a splendour of wrath and outraged dignity, that wrung from him an involuntary admiration, though it moved him not a whit.

"You will *not*!" he said, echoing her words very gently, but with an undercurrent of meaning in his voice, that turned her cold with momentary dread. "Oh yes, I think you will, my daughter. You forget——"

He bent towards her, and whispered a few words in her ear. They seemed to turn her to stone. Her eyes fell, a shiver as of intense cold shook her from head to foot. "My God!" dropped from her cold white lips. "You are right—I forgot."

A few minutes later he passed from her presence. The victory was in his own hands again!

CHAPTER II

"WHAT WILL HE THINK?"

My heart swims blind in a sea
That stuns me; swims to and fro,
And gathers to windward and lee
Lamentation and mourning and woe!

THE freshness and glory of the springtide was over. In the May noons it was as hot as summer, and the noise of the fountains and the blaze of the sunshine were all one seemed to notice in Rome.

Faustine looked out at the deserted streets and the closed houses as her carriage bore her to the villa she had rented, and the wide blue sky, and the splashing water, and the glitter of the sunlight made her feel sick at heart.

"What will he think when he hears?" she thought to herself.

She was alone. Her husband had laughed at her whim and bade her do as she pleased about indulging it, but he had remained in Paris.

Père Jerome had made all the arrangements necessary. She had had nothing to do save travel thither, and now she was making her way to the beautiful little luxurious villa amidst its flowers and fountains, far away from the city's heat and close noisome air. She might live as quietly as she pleased, not a soul need know of her presence there, save one, the one whose actions she was to watch, over whose life her influence was again to be overcast. No wonder her cheeks burned with shame at the thought, no wonder her tired eyes gazed wearily out at the blue sky and the distant mountains. No wonder that she envied the wheeling flight of the birds above her head, for they at least had freedom, and no gift of life seems sweet as that, to a heart that owns it not.

As her horses stopped at the gates in the glow of the sunset, she saw two figures passing slowly along by the walls that bounded the villa gardens. One was that of a man very old and feeble, the other that of a girl in the very heyday of youth, with a slight graceful figure and a face whose loveliness looked back to her like a vision of other years.

Involuntarily she leaned forward and looked at the girl long and earnestly. Then the gates opened and closed. The carriage passed in, and with a sigh she put aside the thought that seemed like a memory of her youth. "One sees such strange likenesses in faces," she murmured, "and of Valerie my thoughts are always full."

"Did you notice how that lady looked at me, Marco?" asked the girl, passing onward under the shade of the cypress and acacias in the softened splendour of the May sunset.

"Yes; she is a stranger, too, and comes at a strange time to Rome."

"Rome is always beautiful, I think," said the girl dreamily, as her eyes wandered over the dark clustered roofs, and the great dome that stood out against the gold and crimson tints of the sky.

"Beautiful only to youth and dreamers," the old man answered mournfully, "because scarce any place holds such memories or keeps embalmed such legends of the past, or brings so near to us the old glorious days of Art's triumphs and Freedom's achievements. But, my dear, who cares for such things now? We have steam-engines and tramways, and our streets are thronged with the Inglesse who chaffer for all that is classed under the head of 'curios.' We go about the old ways together, you and I, and we talk of Etrurian and Sabine Rome, of all the shadows that fill for us the sacred woods upon the Palatine; but who would think

of such things now, who was in any way wise, or believed in that God of Progress who laughs to scorn the old dead deities? We know and feel that Art had a lovelier origin than Realism; but then, we are foolish folk who have lived on treasures of the past, and follow its shadows onward to the present time. For us Rome has two faces."

"You were born in Rome yourself, Marco?"

"Yes. Perhaps that is why I love it. I do not know. It was different in my youth, on my eyes were different as they gazed upon it. We talk of change, but so often it is only that we ourselves are changed."

"But we are happy now, Marco. The Prince has been so kind, and has promised so much for me, and you need not work any more now; and when once I have sung and have won success, I will sing nothing but your music, until it is famous everywhere, and the world will no longer dare to deny its merits!"

"My child," said the old man, smiling up at the bright enthusiastic face, "success is not so easy, even for one gifted like yourself. And, with the best will in the world to help your old *maestro*, you will find that others must be considered first, and that their wills bar the way to the hearing of the public."

"But the Prince has great influence."

"True; but his influence has been besought for you, and to that end alone I wish to secure it. As for my music—well, I am an old man now, and life for me is nearly over; I have missed so much these many years that I can well afford to miss it to the end."

The girl was silent. Such words always saddened her; the more so because the fear they breathed was one always tangible and close at hand. He was so old—so very old—and for her life had but begun. Never, perhaps, would he rejoice in her triumphs, and sympathise in her successes, and be with her to share all that fortune might bestow.

They went on silently together, both hearts full of many thoughts. To one, life held all that was possible; to the other, only all that was sad.

The sunset was fading on the hills, and the heights of the Sabine mountains were glowing with an opal's changeable hues, and all the low-lying plains were dusk with shadow. The scene was beautiful as ever, and the girl's young eyes had gazed on it always with a delight that never palled; but to-night something seemed to oppress and disturb her, a certain lassitude and a certain weariness weighed upon her, and she walked on in the soft glow of the dying light as one in a dream.

“How happy that beautiful woman must be!” she sighed presently.

Marco started, and looked up at her with a sudden wonder. He had forgotten all about the signora at the villa gates.

“Happy! Because she wears fine clothes and drives in a carriage! My child, you little know how much weariness and misery can live and beat in hearts that seem throned above all common needs and troubles of life.”

And indeed, if he could have seen the woman of whom he spoke now, he would have marvelled at the truth of his own words.

Faustine had sunk on her knees in her bedchamber, which had its window open to the beauty and fragrance of the gardens; all the scents of the orange trees and magnolias swept up to it on the cool freshness of the evening breeze. She had fallen there and let her head drop on her arms, and was weeping bitterly.

That fair girl-face had brought back a memory of her own youth, her own past, and her heart felt sick as she thought of all that life had been to her.

There was nothing to hope for or look forward to now; and all of joy or sweetness her life knew was centered in one memory of one man.

When Love is hardest to a woman he teaches her to remember.

Several days came and went, and Faustine had not met Cecil face to face. She knew where he lived. The white walls of her own villa were within sight of that old neglected yet picturesque dwelling which he had chosen for his home, and where he was known as the Signor Celli.

From her windows she could see into the great dusky half-wild gardens, where the birds sang in the ilex thickets, and the butterflies floated among the drooping clusters of the roses, and all the burning noontide heat was shut out by the heavy masses of foliage.

Once she saw him come out and stand on the terrace, looking towards Rome, where the last glow of daylight lingered golden over the crowded roofs, and the great cross of St. Peter's glittered in the sun.

She had watched him, and the old sense of loathing and of shame came hot and fierce with pain to her heart as she gazed. She felt she would have faced death sooner than have met him; and yet, sooner or later, that meeting must take place.

When it did happen, it was strangely and unexpectedly enough,

She had walked out one evening about two weeks after her arrival. The lovely deep azure of the sky was lit with clusters of stars, the air was full of fragrance, and the pale clear moonlight threw its brilliancy over the shadowed road and across the dusky plains. She had her great hound beside her, and strolled on. She had no fear at any time, and loved the solitude and freedom that she claimed for her life here.

She did not know that her every action was watched; that two spies—the messengers one of fear and one of jealousy—were ever about her, free as she thought herself. For of the two men who held her life in bondage, neither trusted her or believed in the fidelity that, though wrung from despair, she yet gave without a shadow of falseness.

In the sweet cool evening light she walked on now, her head bent over a cluster of flowers she held, her eyes gazing dreamily at the road; and so, half dreaming and half conscious, came straight towards the very man of whom her thoughts were full.

He stood and looked at her amazed. Then his face grew very cold and very white. Perhaps he remembered another meeting, as strange and unexpected as this, when the sunlight lay on a shining sea, and youth and hope and all fair things of life had seemed his own.

She spoke with perfect composure.

"Mr. Calverley. Why, how astonished you look! Yes; it is I—really. My physician has banished me to Rome. An odd freak, and at this time of the year too; but not more odd than that we should meet."

"I live here," he answered, and there was something more of melancholy than of coldness in his voice now. Of late it had seemed to him that he could forgive Faustine, bitter as he had once felt against her. Was it because of some fair hope resting far off in the future, or for sake of the disenchantment that had come with their meeting in Paris? "You do not look strong, madame," he went on presently. "But surely the heat here will try you very much. I should have thought more bracing air——"

She shivered suddenly. "No," she answered. "You are wrong. Bracing air does not agree with me."

Her face looked very pale and weary, and the eyes were softly dark as they had never been in the days of her sovereignty and witchery. She looked so worn and sad as she stood there in that silvery evening light, that Cecil Calverley's heart was stirred with a faint pity.

His voice grew gentler still as he turned and walked on by her side along the beautiful shadowy way, where the slanting moon-rays seemed to stretch from heaven to earth.

They talked briefly and disjointedly at first, for the thoughts of both were busy with things of other days; but while the woman's heart ached with an intensity of longing, the man's was tranquil and unstirred. That love of old looked to him so mad and foolish a passion now; now that his life was so full of grave cares, so empty of all feeling, now that it had only garnered up one frail blossom as it passed along the great highway, and kept that to itself hidden in soft obscurity, and tended with but gentle thoughts.

But this, Faustine could not know. She walked on in a sort of happy trance, while across the peace and gladness of her thoughts fell the rich deep cadence of that one voice which seemed to hold all the music of her life.

When she met his eyes her face grew warmer, her heart throbbed with sudden pain and grew cold with as sudden a chill. He was so much to her, and to him she was—nothing. Fate had avenged him only too surely.

That night, when Cecil stood alone in his quiet studio and looked on his work, something more nearly like gladness than he had long known, stole over his heart.

“The world calls me great,” he murmured. “Is it right or wrong? Ought I to be thankful for the misfortunes that drove me to this after all? I was but an idle dreamer once, and it is suffering that has given me strength. Across what a gulf of years I seem to look to that time when I loved *her*! She was more wise than I when she said our lives were unsuited to each other. She is a calm, self-possessed woman of the world now. And once I deemed her magnanimous. I remember even now how she told me of the wrong it would be to take advantage of my youth and bind my life to hers. Pshaw! and simply because I had no title and not sufficient wealth to offer. Marriage would have been no worse wrong to me than to the man she chose, and yet—almost—I believed in her. Well, she does not look a happy woman for all her wealth and honours and beauty. How beautiful she is still! How soft her eyes looked in the starlight! Eyes—starlight—what am I talking about? These things are over and done with for me. Where is my little waif's last letter? How prettily and tenderly she writes! Ah me!”

He took up a letter and read it slowly and with a tender light on his face, then folded it and put it aside with a heavy sigh.

“It is time she wrote again,” he said, moving to and fro in the great dusky quiet chamber that was in its way so beautiful and quaint. “Ah, Pippo, is that you? What's that?—a letter, and at this time! The post——”

* A telegram, *eccellenza*!

A moment, and the paper was torn open—read. Then a low fierce imprecation burst from Cecil's lips. His face grew ghastly, and his hands clenched like a vice on the little ill-omened fragment that had brought to him the fatal news.

This was the message. It was from the Marchioness of Clevedon, Calsthorpe :

"Félice has left us. How or why, we cannot tell. Write, or come at once."

CHAPTER III

O mystery—many-faced.

THE next day saw Cecil speeding towards the land on which he had vowed never to set foot again. He had had neither rest nor sleep since that message had reached him. His heart was wrung with alternate rage and fear. Treachery of some sort, he could not but suspect. Félice was too open and candid and ingenuous to have acted in any way without consulting first his wishes.

The time seemed endless till he reached England, and scarce allowing himself food or rest he hastened on to Calsthorpe. It was near sunset when he reached it, and travel-stained and wearied as he was, he was at once ushered into the presence of the Marchioness. Lord Danvers was expected home that night.

But nothing Cecil learnt could throw any light on the mystery. Félice had seemed perfectly happy and content, had made no friends, and spent most of her time in roaming through the woods, or driving with the kind, stately old lady when she went on her rounds of ceremonious calls or gentle charities. One morning she had requested permission to go out as usual, and never returned. Luncheon-time had passed, then the afternoon, and at last, growing uneasy at her long absence, search had been made through all the park. In vain. No one had seen her. She had not passed through the village, and from that time her disappearance had been an unexplained mystery.

"And really, Mr. Calverley," continued the old lady, "we seem to have had one horror after another. In the search for Félice, a discovery was made in the park that has thrown the whole country into a state of dire alarm. The body of a young man was discovered in one of the most unfrequented spots; he had been foully murdered—stabbed, they say. Nothing respecting his identity can be discovered; his watch,

purse, and a ring on his finger were untouched, but there was no paper or card to give any clue to his home or abode. The landlord of the Clevedon Arms says that some weeks back a young man looking like a sailor, he thought, stayed there for a few minutes to get a draught of ale, and asked the way to the park here. He has no remembrance of his returning, and the body is in too terrible a state for identification. Bills and advertisements are out everywhere, but to no effect, as yet. These two occurrences have really quite upset me. Such things have never happened in these quiet regions in all my experience."

"But, Félice! My God! if she has fallen into some villain's hands, been entrapped, decoyed away," and Cecil paced the room in a terrible agitation. He felt faint and sick at the thought. She was so young, so beautiful, so innocent. What might not have happened ere this?

"Have you asked, can you hear nothing?" he cried suddenly. "She cannot have been carried off without some sign or clue—in broad daylight, too."

"The same day she disappeared a carriage was seen driving rapidly along the high road towards Stoneton, and in it were a young girl and a man, elderly, and dressed like a clergyman. That is the only clue we have been able to obtain. No one who has seen the carriage seems to have seen the girl's face distinctly, but undoubtedly there was no forcing or foul play in the matter, otherwise she would have cried out for assistance. Two labourers saw the carriage at different times. We had it traced from Stoneton to Thorpe. It was left there. The travellers went from Thorpe by train. That is all."

"A clergyman," muttered Cecil, standing there before his informant and eagerly drinking in her words. "Are you sure it was not a priest who was with her?"

The Marchioness shook her head: "These ploughmen are not over-bright in the matter of intellect. I doubt if they could note any difference between the denominations. A clergyman was what they all said. Don't look so distressed, Mr. Calverley. Perhaps we shall hear from her soon. If she has gone away of her own free will, she will surely write. And there are all her clothes here waiting her directions. Really, the more I think of her conduct the more extraordinary it seems."

Cecil stood there silent, battling with a horrible fear that seemed to chill and sicken his whole heart.

"It is the work of that damned priest," he muttered between his set teeth; "he has used his threats to some purpose,"

He walked over to the window and looked blankly out. He could form no clear plan, his brain was throbbing dizzily, and a mist seemed before his eyes, and shut out all the glory of the dying light.

"Vere will be home soon," said the old lady gently. "He may be able to advise us, or suggest something; though, indeed, what can we do more? Detectives are following up the clue, advertisements have been in every paper, and it is from her that news ought to come. The whole affair is so mysterious."

Cecil hardly heard, hardly noticed. He had not thought what the child was to him till now, had not dreamt that she had taken such hold upon his life and heart. Now he remembered all these instances of her love for himself, her childlike purity, her simple truth, her long and constant affection which for all these years had never failed. Now he seemed to see her wrenched from his life, unconscious of his own growing love that had in it no delirium of passion, or fire of jealousy, but was so strong and tender and devoted that in it she might have trusted, and in its shelter she might have lived, for all the years to come.

His life had never looked to him so empty as it looked now, for the thought that had come to him in the springtime, when the lips he touched, had trembled beneath his own, had taken deeper and deeper root within his heart, and apart from the desolation of circumstances and destiny he had looked forward to some sweetness of hope that lay like the first rose-cloud of dawn on the passing shadows of a long and dreary night.

She was no longer the child he had cherished; she was like the ideal of a long-past dream, and as such had stood before him in her brilliant youth that had seemed to smile down all thoughts of sorrow or of pain, and from the dreams of another world had come to glorify this.

And now he had lost her. The thought stung him to madness. Was *nothing* to be left to him? Was the curse of that fatal foe to blight every hope and dream and sweet possession that could gladden or glorify his life?

He drew a sudden sharp breath. His hand clenched tight with a spasm of fierce and ruthless hate and a longing for vengeance. "If he has done *this*," he said in his heart, "before Heaven he shall answer for it as man to man!"

The memory of his perished youth was not so sweet to him now as the memory of this fair and beautiful life rescued by himself, owning him for its guardian, turning to him with the dreams of youth and maidenhood and all that love holds most pure and perfect and unspoilt. And was this memory to be

lost to him, this hope torn from his life; were calamity and bitterness and disillusion to be always his portion, and the coldness of dead desires to rest always on his heart?

Once again had some faint glow rekindled from its ashes, and now a ruthless hand had struck out the light and left him again but darkness. The hand from which he had accepted calamity now waved him back from the rising visions of hope, but adversity had braced his energies, and he was in no mood to sit calmly down and surrender without a struggle what he had held and cherished so long.

The words of Lady Clevedon went sounding on and on, but his ears took in neither sense nor meaning of what she said, and when at last he left her presence and went to the rooms prepared for him, his mind was set determinedly on one thing, to find Félice if she lived on earth, and learn the truth from her own lips.

"She would never have gone away of her own free will; of that I am convinced," he said to himself in that solitude that was so welcome now. All the coldness and stoicism to which he had schooled his nature fell off him like a mantle that is cast aside. While she was safe, happy, unharmed, he had not dreamt he loved her as now he felt he did; for before the thought of danger, wrong, or peril to that fair and innocent life, he flung aside all the chill calm of the stern philosophy to which he had vowed himself, and knew that reason had not yet mastered feeling, that Nature could still demand her rights.

How long and wearisome the time seemed! How sick he was of that endless story of the murder which seemed to have thrust into insignificance that other mystery of the young girl's flight. For once he deemed Vere unsympathising, but then, Vere could not know of the lava flames burning in his heart, the mingled passions of love and fear and vengeance that swept over his life's long calm as a stream that overflows its barriers at last, and with a bound of triumph leaps into the dry parched channels from which it has been held back for long.

It seemed an age till he was alone with his friend, till in some relief of words his chained and fiery thoughts could force their way from his throbbing brain. Lord Danvers listened to him amazed. The suspicions that Cecil's words proclaimed with ever-increasing certainty had never entered his mind; he thought his friend in error. "What could Père Jerome have done such a thing for?" he asked wonderingly. "What object——"

"Object!" interrupted Cecil furiously. "A ruthless, unscrupulous priest has many objects in view that our eyes

cannot perceive. He has some object ; of that I feel convinced. What it is, I shall find out, if I die for it. My God ! that lovely child in *his* power ; the very thought of it is torture ! ”

Vere looked at him in startled surprise for the space of a few seconds. Then a sudden revelation seemed to come to him. “ Blows the wind so ? ” he murmured to himself. “ Did I not say he would one day regret the life he had saved ? Oh ! poor Cis, poor Cis, to have escaped all these years and then fall captive to a child’s fair face and heavenly smile ! Not but she is lovely enough to win any man’s heart ; but Cecil—I thought he was as safe as—myself.”

With the next day Cecil Calverley was pursuing the one faint clue that led him to the town of Thorpe, and there seemed lost in utter mystery ; while through village and town and city rang out the news of that strange murder in Calsthorpe Park, and on every wall stood out the advertised reward offered by the Government and doubled by the Marquis of Clevedon for the discovery of the murderer.

CHAPTER IV

“ CAN IT BE ? ”

Behold and see
What a great heap of grief lay hid in woe.
E. B. Browning.

A WEEK had passed since Faustine had met Cecil Calverley. She knew of his hurried departure, and, obedient to her instructions, had telegraphed the information to Père Jerome. Then she waited, sick at heart and weary, for some news or some explanation of that sudden journey to England. But none came.

Rome grew hateful to her—hateful as the hot skies and bright days, the burning noons, the sound of the lutes in the moonlight, or the shine of the stars above the palms and orange-groves. What had all or any of these things to do with her in that chill calm of isolation, that fierce and terrible longing for joys her life had never known, and could never know now ?

Sometimes she thought, in an agony of shame and wounded pride, that Cecil Calverley must have thought she had come here because of himself—that this was the reason of his abrupt departure ; but then again came the memory of his

courtesy and gentleness, his changed manner to herself, his looks and words that were so different to the chill calm scorn of his manner in Paris. She had gone home that night saying to herself: "He would forgive me if he knew." And then the next day he had left Rome!

She heard nothing from Père Jerome; nothing from Cecil. The hours and the days drifted slowly by, and she remained shut up in her villa, seeing no one, and only stirring out in the cool of the evenings.

Returning from one of these rambles of hers, she met again the young girl and the old man who had attracted her attention on the day of her arrival in Rome. The old man seemed unusually feeble, and the girl's face looked pale and weary as she bore up his faltering steps.

Involuntarily Faustine paused and spoke with her usual gracious courtesy: "Your father seems very feeble," she said; "will you bring him in and rest for awhile? My house is close at hand."

The girl's fair face flushed: she would have refused the offer, but Marco pressed her arm and spoke himself. "You are very kind, signora; I am indeed weary. I fear I mistook my strength when I thought I could walk so far."

"Then pray come in and rest," said Faustine with eagerness. Her eyes were still resting on the girl's face. The memory it brought back to her was stronger than ever within her heart to-night.

The old man accepted her offer, and in a few moments was seated in one of her garden seats, while the Countess despatched a servant for wine and fruit.

"Do you live in Rome?" she asked the girl, who stood leaning negligently against the chair, her eyes wandering rapidly from spot to spot of the lovely grounds.

"Yes, signora," she answered, "we have lived here for many years."

"You—you are not Italian?" asked Faustine anxiously, struck by something in the accent of the sweet young voice.

"She is of French parentage, I believe," answered the old man.

"You believe? Then you are not her father? Pardon my seeming curiosity, but she reminds me of—of a friend I once knew, and she was French. May I ask your name, *bellissima*?"

"I—I do not know it myself, madame," the girl answered with a deep blush.

"Her history is mysterious, signora," the old man said with a sigh. "She was brought to Italy in her childhood by a man who spends his life travelling to all sorts of

"I CAN'T TELL."

countries, and procuring young children for the purpose of bringing them up as dancers. It was to be Quità's fate, but happily she was saved from it. Of who or what she was, we know nothing."

"But how did she escape from this man?" asked Faustine eagerly.

"I escaped by Marco's aid, signora," answered the girl. "It is to him I owe everything. I shudder to think what my life would have been by this time if Heaven had not sent me such a friend."

"Nay, my child," answered the old man tenderly, "I did little enough."

"What do you purpose with her in the future?" inquired Faustine, looking with ever-deepening interest at the face, whose rapidly increasing likeness to that beloved one in her memory startled her more each moment.

"She is to be a singer," answered Marco proudly. "She has a voice that will win her all fame, and a genius that will lift her above the heads of queens. Do you think I speak too warmly, signora? Ah, if you but heard her!"

"I would give a great deal for that privilege," said the Countess gently. "Then you mean her for the operatic stage?"

"Yes; and we have been fortunate enough to secure great interest and high favour," answered the old man garrulously. "The Prince Sanfriano has been most kind to us both; all the summer through we stayed at his Palazzo, that beautiful place on the hills. You can see the towers from here; but doubtless you know it, signora."

"Prince Sanfriano!" exclaimed Faustine with a certain pained and contemptuous accent in her voice. "Is *he* your friend?"

"He has been a most kind and generous one," the girl interposed warmly. "Do you also know him, signora?"

"Yes," answered Faustine quietly, "I know him."

She was looking with troubled eyes at the girl's radiant beauty, and her heart grew heavy within her. The friendship of such a man as that fickle and amorous prince, would be a dangerous favour to this exquisite young singer.

"He is a good man and generous, most generous; there are few like him," persisted old Marco. The wine had refreshed him and unloosed his tongue. "What he has done for us! Ah! may the saints remember and reward him!"

"Will you sing to me?" asked Faustine abruptly, as she turned towards the girl. "I know something of stage-life myself. I also have great interest in Paris; I might be able to assist you in your wishes, and a woman's aid to a woman is at least *safer* than that of man."

The girl's cheek grew hot, she raised herself from that attitude of languid rest, and her eyes grew dark with scorn and wrath. "I would accept favour from neither man nor woman," she said proudly, "if I had my way; only—for Marco's sake——" Her voice broke abruptly; the anger died out of her eyes. All of love and tenderness her life knew was centred up and given to this one friend.

"There can be no question of favour, my child," he answered, his eyes kindling with pride as he looked at her. "All that is done for you, you can repay tenfold. Let the gracious lady hear your voice and say if I am not right."

"Will you sing here or in my rooms?" asked Faustine.

"Here," decided the old man. "Have you a lute? Ah yes, who is without one in Rome? Now, Quità, that little song I made for you—the serenade in 'Giulietta.'"

"You write music—operas?" asked Faustine, looking wonderingly at one whom she had deemed little more than a beggar.

"Alas! yes, signora! And I have written but for deaf ears, and found my reward in poverty and neglect. But no matter, no matter, my child repays me for all."

He struck a few notes on the lute he held, and then, under the glory of the throbbing stars, and seeming to fill all the heat and fragrance of the summer night with its ecstasy of sound, rose the music of a voice the like of which Faustine had never heard. Without effort, with her beautiful face upturned to the blue sky, and her lovely lips just parted to release the matchless melody, so the girl stood, a living picture for an artist's eyes and ears.

Faustine listened in wonder and delight, moved to her very soul's depths by an emotion of enthusiasm such as she had never experienced.

"It is marvellous! Exquisite!" she cried breathlessly, as the song ceased and the last tender notes thrilled and died away like a sigh of exhausted rapture.

"With a voice like that you may indeed do as you will. Who has heard you—publicly, I mean?"

"No one, as yet, save the Prince," answered Marco. "She is so young, and I did not wish her to be spoilt by over-training. She has a perfect knowledge of her art musically, the dramatic part has next to be acquired. It is for that I asked Prince Sanfrignano's aid. The drawback to the scheme is that she will have to go to Milan to study, so his highness says. In a year he thinks she might appear. Her voice, you see, is all there, and she is so quick the other part will come easy enough."

"I wish you would let me be of some service instead of

Prince Sanfriano," exclaimed Faustine eagerly. "I was once on the stage myself."

"You, madame?" interrupted the girl breathlessly.

"Yes; does it seem so wonderful? I did nothing great, though. Nothing but what you would deem a desecration of talent. But I had my bread to gain and—another object in view, it matters not what. I am not proud of it now, nor was I then. But for yourself—this prince—you think his friendship really disinterested?"

Marco looked at her with a troubled expression. "Of a certainty, signora. He has been most kind."

Faustine glanced at the girl. She had wandered off to a short distance and was bending over the fragrant cups of the closed magnolia flowers.

"Your young charge is very beautiful," she said hurriedly. "Do you think men will not see that? And though Sanfriano may admire her genius, there is something he admires more, in women, or the world, and I belie him."

"You know him too?" said the old man eagerly.

"I do; that is why I speak. He is not a safe friend for any woman who is young, and fair, and innocent."

"I understand you, signora, and I thank you, though it goes hard to me to harbour doubts of one who has been so kind."

"One word more. She—does she think as gratefully of him as yourself?" asked Faustine low and earnestly, as her eyes followed the movements of the graceful young figure.

"She thinks of nothing save me and her music, I think," he answered. "It makes me anxious sometimes; she is wrapped in dreams, she is utterly at peace. Her mind is beautiful and pure, and guileless as a child's; and she has genius too. The world is a bad place for her. I know that, and it gives me many a troubled thought, and anxious hour. But why do I try your patience with the history of my sorrows and anxieties? You have been kind, and you seem interested in the child. I thank you for it, and I will remember your warning and try to do my best for her—only—I am so old, and soon perhaps she may be quite alone."

"I would be her friend if you would let me."

"You, signora? You have never even seen her till to-night."

"Yes; once before. But she is so like, so strangely like one I loved and lost, in years gone by. For her sake, in her memory, I would serve your child. The world has not been so kind to me but that I can compassionate youth, and fear its favours for one so fair, so gifted, so friendless."

"You are most generous, madame, and most kind; but we could not accept the obligation of your charity."

"Charity!" exclaimed Faustine bitterly. "What does the Prince Sanfriano offer you, then?"

"I worked for him," the old man answered simply; "and for all her expenses at Milan her own earnings will pay."

"You believe that, and doubt me?"

"I believe what the Prince told me, and what the *impresario*, who heard Quità sing, promised."

"I cannot, of course, press my wishes upon you," answered Faustine almost bitterly; "only the girl is young and trusting, and beautiful and innocent. Take care how you guard her. I speak as a woman; you should know what I mean."

"I know, and I thank you for your warning. I promise to think of it."

"And if at any time you see fit to change your mind, remember me. I could help the girl and would do it gladly; and with me she would at least be safe. Did you know more of the world, you would know that so much could hardly be said of the guardianship of Sanfriano."

"Your words trouble me," answered the old man. "It seems disloyal to listen to warnings against one who has been so kind and good a friend; but again, you are a woman, you should know. I am so ignorant of the world and what it says, and she—she only dreams. Yes, you are right. If harm comes to her I could never forgive myself."

"Then think over what I have said and come to me again; come to-morrow," exclaimed Faustine eagerly.

He looked over to where that white and slender figure stood among the dark leaves and creamy buds, with the silver lights and dusky shadows all about her.

"How hard it is to know what is best," he said, rising wearily from the seat where he had been resting. "As long as she was a child I could guard her; now——"

A sigh broke across his words, and ended them. The girl had seen him rise, and came quickly back to his side.

"Shall we go home?" she asked.

But for long after they had left, Faustine paced to and fro her beautiful gardens, troubled and sad at heart. "How that girl interests me," she said to herself; "and that likeness, how it strengthens when she speaks and looks. Strange that I should be so moved; I, who care so little for any human creature's loves or sorrows now!"

CHAPTER V

I can but remember such things were
That were most precious to me.—*Shakespeare.*

THE last rays of the setting sun were shining through a narrow lancet window. A window belonging to a dark and barren room, the scanty furniture of a convent cell its only adornment.

Leaning forwards in the hard wooden chair, that was the only seat, with her head pressed on her clasped hands, and her loosened hair sweeping the bare floor, was a young girl. Great sobs shook her slight form from time to time. Now and then a shiver, as of intense terror, passed through her, and she would lift her head and look with agonised dread at the barred door of her cell. She knew she had been tricked, trapped, brought thither, but for what purpose she was as yet ignorant.

As the light faded little by little, and the narrow chamber grew dark, she rose to her feet in a deadly agony of fear. Hours had passed since she had been shut in here, and suspense was torture to a nature highly strung and sensitive as her own.

At last came a sound of feet along the outer corridor, the bolts of the cell were withdrawn. A light flashed across the gloom of her prison, and she saw before her the face and figure of a priest.

"It is you! Oh! Père Jérôme, I am so frightened. What is the meaning of all this? Where is my father? Your messenger said I should see him, and since I came here I have been shut in this cell. What does it all mean? Is my father here?"

"My child," said the priest soothingly, "you are agitated and confused, try and calm yourself, and listen to me. I have much to tell you. Why, how you tremble. You need have no fear. We are not strangers to each other."

"No," said the girl, drawing back with a shudder from the hand that lay upon her arm. "But I fail to see by what right you have treated me like this, and I demand an instant explanation."

"Which I came to give you, my daughter. But sit down and compose yourself. My story is a long one."

"Make it brief if possible," said the girl haughtily, "for I am anxious to get away from here."

A slight smile curled the priest's lips. As she seated herself on the narrow pallet he took the chair opposite, keeping

his own face in shadow while the light from the lamp fell full on hers.

“The story of your birth is yet unknown to you,” he said calmly. “With great patience and innumerable difficulties I have succeeded in tracing it step by step. Give me your whole attention now, for it is necessary. To commence with, your mother was an actress, celebrated in Paris for her beauty and her talents. She married and had two children, twin daughters. Your father and herself did not live happily together, and he at last left her and went abroad. She gave up the stage then, and taking your sister and yourself with her went to live in a retired part of Southern France, where she died.”

“She is dead, then. Ah, Heaven!” murmured the girl despairingly.

“She is dead,” resumed the priest, “and she died believing that your father had pre-deceased her. As circumstances afterwards proved, he had done nothing of the sort. He came back from abroad, found out where you were, and took you away with him, it was supposed to America. Perhaps he found one child burden enough, perhaps he wished some philanthropist to share his responsibility. I cannot tell, in any case he took *one* child away with him, the other was left in a nook of forest-land to perish or not as Fate might determine. Yes, I see you follow my meaning. Your father was a villain without doubt, but Fate saved you from him, and the hand of Charity gave you life and sustenance.”

“But why have you decoyed me here under pretence of seeing my father?” exclaimed the girl with sudden impetuosity. “Does he know that I live? He cannot care whether I do or not, after flinging me aside from his life in my helpless childhood.”

“Your father,” said the priest slowly, “is dead also.”

“Dead! Then why ——”

· “Do not be impetuous, my daughter; it is a sad fault in a woman. Yes, he died abroad; and ere dying left a will proving that he was possessed of great wealth, which wealth naturally falls to his children, or perhaps I should say child for I can discover nothing of your sister, and find it impossible to trace her. This will is in my possession, and with it a letter of instructions respecting yourself.”

“How could he leave such a letter when he was ignorant whether I lived or not?” demanded the girl wonderingly.

“He trusted in Providence to befriend you, I suppose,” the priest answered, with a strange cold smile.

“And how came you to know all this, holy father?”

"That is no matter now. I have been acting on your behalf, and grudged neither time nor money to find out and piece together the parts of your strange history."

"For what purpose?"

A dark flush rose to the clear olive cheek. He was silent for an instant.

"It was but natural I should take an interest in you, was it not?" he said after a moment's consideration. "I knew your mother, and loved her very dearly once."

"You loved my mother!" exclaimed the girl, gazing at him in amazement.

"Even so. Is it so wonderful a thing? I was not *always* a priest."

The girl looked at him silently; then drew a quick sharp breath.

"Still, holy father, I fail to see why I should have been brought to this place under false pretences to hear all this. Your messenger purported to come from you, and was to bring me to my father's dying bed; now you say my father died abroad. Why could you not have come to Calsthorpe and seen me there? You would have been admitted at once. As it is, my hurried flight is all unexplained, for I have not been allowed to communicate with my friends. I do not even know where I am!"

"You are in France."

"I thought as much. Well, I await your explanation."

"And suppose I give you none?"

"The girl's eyes flashed fire; she sprang to her feet and faced him, her whole face glowing with scorn and indignation.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your father's directions led me to take this step; nay, that my own relationship to yourself authorises it," said the priest sternly.

"Your relationship!" faltered the girl.

"Even so. I told you I loved your mother in years gone by; I did not tell you why or by what right. She was—my own child."

"Yours! My God!"

Something in the loathing and dread and anguish of the voice filled him with fierce wrath.

"I told you I was not always a priest. When I became so I divorced myself from all such ties. She never knew what I was to her, nor would you have heard it now, save that I know the secret is safe; for your father's death leaves me your sole earthly relative and empowers me with all due authority. You will remain at this convent for a

year ; at the expiration of that time you will take the veil. The world is no place for you, nor do I mean you to dwell amidst its temptations. These are your father's wishes, subject to my discovery of you, and these wishes I intend to see carried out."

The girl's face grew white as death as she heard those cold and pitiless words. She saw it all now ! The scheme, the plot laid to decoy her thither, the tyranny that would hold her, the lifelong bondage threatening all the glory and sweetness of her dawning womanhood. A great fierce rebellion stirred her heart ; submit to such a doom she felt she could not.

"I do not wish to take the veil," she said haughtily. "Such an idea is contrary to my faith, my instincts, my inclinations. If you have authority sufficient to keep me here, I suppose I cannot gainsay it ; but no threat or persuasion will induce me to vow myself to such a life as that you have spoken of."

She looked so young, so dauntless, so fair, that an involuntary admiration came into his cold stern eyes.

"You can scarcely judge yet," he said tranquilly. "Perhaps your pretended guardian has been flattering you with other hopes. You need not dwell on him or them. He is bound to another woman—a woman from whom fate separated him in his youth, but who is now free, and whom he loves. Ah, young and innocent as you are, you understand *that*."

"Does he know where I am? Will you let me write to him?" entreated the girl, her courage breaking down before the dread of Cecil's powerlessness to aid her or befriend her any longer.

"You will have no communication with any single creature in the land you have left, or in the world you have known," answered the priest sternly. "Your life will be passed here in the strictest seclusion, and under the care of one of the most austere of our sisterhood. My will and my authority will rule all your life henceforwards. Rebellion and contumacy are alike useless. Your best plan will be to reconcile yourself to your fate, and carry out my wishes."

"But Cecil? At least he may know. You will not be so cruel," pleaded the girl in agony.

"Cecil shall know nothing of your fate, save that you fled from the protection of the home he secured. He can append any reasons he pleases to that fact."

"Oh, my God!" burst from the pale quivering lips. "You cannot, *cannot* mean it. Why are you so cruel? If you loved my mother, have you no pity for her child?"

"I do but show you the only kindness I can. Your life is not for you to rule or ordain. Others wiser than yourself have done that for you. By patience and submission you will win both peace and happiness—a happiness far greater than the follies and pastimes of that world you have left behind."

"But I cannot submit. I should hate to be a nun, the life is abhorrent. You can have no right to force me. I will not obey. Do you hear, I *will* not!"

He put aside her passionate words with a gesture of disdain. "*Will* not is never said to Rome, my daughter."

She sank down then on the cold bare boards and leaned her bright head on her arms in such an abandonment of hopeless misery that it might have touched his heart with some faint pity.

The closing of the door struck harshly on her ear and roused her at last.

She was alone—alone and helpless as a trapped bird; the prisoner of a priesthood whose power is as merciless as its tyranny.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE SHADOW

One fire burns out another's burning,
One pain is lessened by another's anguish!

Romeo and Juliet.

WITH a perseverance nothing daunted, with an earnest purpose nothing could turn aside, Cecil sought for news of Félise.

But an impenetrable mystery seemed to shroud her, and the secret of her disappearance was still unexplained. There remained but one course open to him, and that was to find Père Jerome and endeavour to gain from him some account of the child. That he was concerned in her flight Cecil felt convinced, and his heart burned with hot indignation as he thought of the treachery that had lured her from his keeping. He felt it would be little use to see the priest, even though that hopelessness of result in no way interfered with his determination. Baffled and wearied but undaunted still, he took his way back to Calsthorpe again.

No news had arrived there, and the two mysteries that had roused all the excitement and interest of the country around seemed as far as ever from being solved. Cecil

stayed to dinner, and promised his hostess at her urgent request to sleep at Calsthorpe that night. On the morrow he had determined to seek out Père Jerome.

Dinner was hardly over when a telegram arrived from Lord Danvers, who was in London. His mother read it and then handed it over to Cecil.

It ran thus :

"If Cecil be with you when this arrives, keep him till I come. I follow by first express. Important news."

Cecil read it and his heart beat quickly. Important news! It could only be of the child; that he took for granted.

"He must have learnt something in London," he said to the Marchioness. "Thank God, we shall have news at last."

His thoughts were full of Félise, his own life and its former ties and interests seemed so completely a thing of the past that it never occurred to him for a single instant to connect the telegram with himself.

The hours seemed leaden-footed, till at last his friend arrived, and then dashing out into the hall to greet him with something of his old impetuosity, Cecil burst out with eager inquiries :

"You have heard of her? You know where she is? For God's sake, tell me at once!"

Lord Danvers looked at him with momentary surprise.

"*Her!* Oh, you mean the child. My dear fellow, it's nothing about *her*; something much more important has happened. Come in here. I am afraid it will shock you, but it's good news all the same, and I for my part am heartily glad of it."

He had drawn Cecil into the library as he spoke, and was standing before him now, looking down at his troubled face.

"I am not a good hand at breaking news," he said abruptly. "Your brother died this morning."

"What!" Cecil's face grew ashy, his lips quivered, he stared incredulously at his friend.

"It is true. How shocked you look! You were not great chums, and for my own part I shall always think Malden treated you very shabbily. Come, bear up, old fellow. There is more yet."

Cecil sat down and covered his face with his hands. At that moment he thought nothing of unkindness, coldness, neglect, only of the brother with whom he had played as a boy in the green glades of Strathavon.

"It must have been awfully sudden!" he murmured faintly.

"It was," answered Lord Danvers. "Can you bear the rest, or shall I wait?"

"No, tell me all."

"His boy took scarlet fever at school, and was brought home to their London house. You know Gerald was wrapped up in that child. I believe he never left him all through his illness. The mother is such a fool; she and the little girl left the place immediately. Well, the long and short of it is, the child died. Gerald took the fever, and in three days was dead also. Now do you see what has happened to you?"

Cecil's hands dropped by his side, His face blanched with something more than grief, looked blankly and agonisedly at the compassionate eyes above him.

"To me?" he faltered. "It can be nothing to me."

"Only that it makes you Earl of Strathavon. Is that nothing?"

Cecil sprang to his feet: "Earl of Strathavon? I? My God! what are you saying?"

"Only the truth, man alive. What has come over you? One would think the idea was impossible."

"Yes," said Cecil, and his head dropped on his hands once more, "it is impossible!"

"Have you taken leave of your senses? In Heaven's name what's the matter?" demanded Lord Danvers, gazing at him in bewilderment. "Of course it is awfully sad and sudden, and a great shock, but then you have not met for years, and were never great friends as far as I can remember, and he has made ducks and drakes of the place I expect—and——"

"Oh hush, for God's sake," cried Cecil wildly, "you don't know, you don't know——"

All the anguish of that day, when first the news of his disinherittance had come to him, rushed back once more—a great voiceless sob rose in his throat. He could not speak, he could not explain, and Lord Danvers stood there before him, gazing with amazed and wondering eyes at this strange and frenzied emotion.

He came to his side, and laid his hand upon his shoulder. "Cis, old fellow, what is it? What troubles you? Surely you can trust me. Has it anything to do with that—that—disappearance of yours, for all those long years?"

Cecil bowed his head: speech was beyond him. How could he explain, how could he tell of this shame and bitterness that had befallen his life?

Lord Danvers looked at him with an intense compassion. He could not comprehend what mystery underlaid his words,

any more than he could understand his strange conduct during that voluntary exile. But he knew Cecil well enough to feel sure that the error, if error there was, was not on his side, and so could afford to wait patiently for explanation.

"You know that your family solicitor is also ours," he continued presently; "I saw him only this morning, and he told me that your brother had left no will. There will of course be the usual provision for the widow and child, and you will have all the rest—what there is, that's to say. Falkener fears the estate is terribly encumbered."

Cecil threw off the sympathising hand, and sprung to his feet.

"Why do you tell me these things, they are nothing to me. You will know that soon enough!"

"Cecil, are you mad?" exclaimed his friend in astonishment.

"Mad! I wish to Heaven I were. I might be dead to sense of shame then!"

"What has shame to do with you?"

Cecil laughed wildly. "It sounds odd, does it? Ah! Vere, I would have told you long ago if I could, but not even to you dared I speak of the blow that crushed all the hope and youth out of my heart ten weary years ago! I—I am not what you—what all the world have thought me. At least my father believed it. I am debarred from all lawful rights. I cannot take name, or title, or possessions, of the race whose blood is in my veins. Now do you understand; now do you see what your news is to me? Only added shame!"

Vere Danvers' face paled, his voice grew husky as he answered:

"I understand, in a way. But are you sure? have you proof?"

"Of my mother's shame?" said Cecil bitterly. "Yes, some. Proof that she loved unwisely; proof that she met her lover when she was another man's wife; proof that I was their child?—no! But my father believed it, and on his death-bed refused to acknowledge me as his son. The entail was cut off for that purpose, and I know he charged Gerald to take every precaution that it should never descend to me. If he has *not* done so it must have been through negligence on his part. But it is Harcourt who will benefit by his death, not I."

"But if your rights are proved?"

"They cannot be; it is not possible; and I would not take advantage of a mere legal quibble to claim what I have been distinctly outlawed from possessing."

"That is Quixotic nonsense!" said Lord Danvers warmly.

"You should have left no stone unturned to assure yourself of the certainty of such an accusation, not calmly accepted it and exiled yourself from name and home and all belonging to you. I don't believe the story. Who first told your father?"

"Need you ask? His saintly confessor, of course. My arch-enemy, Père Jerome."

"And *you* believe his word?"

"His word?—no! But I saw her letters, and her lover's. And I did not believe even them. But of what use to rake up such a story of shame and sorrow? What good would it do? My father died believing it; my brother credited the same story. Strathavon was his, and his children's. I went away from them all, sick at heart and desperate. But my mind was made up. I changed my name; I told no living creature that had known me of where I went or what life I had chosen. I lived unknown and unsought. I would have lived so for ever, only that there was the child."

His voice grew tender over those last words. He loved her more dearly in this time of fear and anxiety than when he had known her safe, and sheltered, and at peace.

Lord Danvers paced the room in deep thought.

"What do you intend to do?" he asked at last.

"Nothing," answered Cecil. "I shall make no sign, no claim. Let them think me dead. Harcourt is abroad, is he not? Ah yes, in India—I thought so. Well, he can step into my place. It is nothing to me. I have had so many buffets at the hand of Fortune that I scarcely feel them now."

"But will you make no effort? Can you accept such a position calmly? By Heaven, Cis, it would madden me to live under the shadow of such a doubt."

"It did me—once. I suppose trouble calms one down. I have got used to it at last."

"But who was the man, the lover?"

"He was a cousin of her own, young, gallant, a soldier too. The story those letters tell is very sad. I think the struggle must have broken her heart at last. She died quite young, you know."

"And he?"

"He was mortally wounded in an affray with the hill-tribes out in India. You see they had been together just for his six months' leave of absence when all this happened. They had loved as boy and girl. They met after years of sadness and separation, then the old love woke again, she was

unhappy, he was—well, God forgive him—he loved her still. There was a struggle—long, heartbreaking, painful. How it ended they alone know. That is all.”

“She was a good woman! I do not think *you* need doubt her, Cis.”

“I never have, Vere,” he answered earnestly. “Never from the first. But I cannot bear to rake up all this old scandal, to verify what is only suspicion. No, I would rather accept my fate and bear it in silence, and let her memory at least rest in honour, even though it be denied her son.”

His voice was very faint, but steady with its earnestness of purpose. Vere Danvers looked at him, and his eyes grew dim for a moment.

“Poor old Cis! poor dear old fellow! what a hard life you have had! D——n that vile priest. This is all his doing. Did I not warn you long ago?”

“Yes; but no warning could have averted this; and, if I had foreseen it, what could I have done?”

“True. Yet still I cannot counsel you to keep this resolution. It seems giving yourself such a hard fate, and for what purpose? Besides, there will be inquiries. People know that you are not dead. Harcourt himself can scarcely be cur enough to usurp your place as if you were. And there are the lawyers.”

“Falkener knows, I believe. There will be no inquiries. The world has forgotten me long ago. Not a soul I have ever known, save yourself, would think of asking what had become of Cecil Calverley now. Ten years! Why, a third of that time would dig a grave of forgetfulness for anyone.”

“But if by search—by private investigation?”

“My dear Vere, do you suppose I have not thought of all that long ago? Nothing can be done at so late a period as this, and privacy would be impossible. The women of our race have all been pure and noble and true. Shall I be the first to rake up scandal against one of them? No; Heaven help me. I could not do it.”

“If I could only help you!”

Cecil stretched out his hand and wrung that of his friend with an earnestness more eloquent than speech.

“You cannot; no one can.”

Silence fell between them for a time. The thoughts of both were busy, yet each felt a strange sense of helplessness. Fate seemed to have done its worst; and both sat there silent and motionless, as if in a pause in the fray. Cecil spoke at last.

“Have you heard nothing of Félise? When I got your message, I hoped you had learnt something.”

Lord Danvers shook his head.

"Nothing." To tell you the truth, I could only think of you and of what this news might be to you."

"It is less than nothing," sighed Cecil wearily. "I must leave you to make the best explanation you can to your people. I am sure they will wonder."

"One question more. Those letters—you are sure they are not forgeries?"

"Sure, my God, yes. I have heaps of her own letters to me, it is a writing no one could imitate easily. Besides, there are his also and the names, and my father's letter. Oh, Vere, I wish doubt were possible. I don't believe there was anything more than imprudence, but who can prove that!"

"And you won't defy the chances?"

"What use?" The moment I lay claim to title or inheritance that sleuth-hound will proclaim the story to the world. He holds me in his power, so far."

"But the letters—they are in your possession now?"

"No; they were stolen during my illness; and he has other proof also—a witness, one of her own maids. My father pensioned her off—bought her silence, I suppose. You know, the truth was only discovered after my father's death."

"Still, I would not give in, were I you. I would defy that devil to do his worst."

"I might, had I any object to gain, any ambition for the future. But I have none. I am utterly hopeless and weary. Life has no pleasures left for me. The empty honours I might gain have no charms now."

"But if you loved; if you married?"

A burning flush swept over Cecil's face. He rose and paced the room with restless steps. "That would not alter my fate. The world and I have done with each other."

"And what of the waif?"

"Poor child! Heaven protect her now. I shall search for her without ceasing. If that villain has entrapped her, as I suspect, it will be the worst day's work he has ever done!"

"He is a slippery customer to tackle," remarked Lord Danvers, "and I wish you well of your encounter. By Jove, I would like to be your second in that affray."

"Even his blood could not wipe out the wrongs he has heaped upon my head," muttered Cecil savagely. "He seems to hate me as devils hate. When I think of him, when I look back on what he has made my life, I seem to have no instinct within me but one of vengeance—merciless and black as his own. Some day, if I meet him—some hour when our reckoning is at hand—I almost fear I shall forget

all save that one instinct. I never knew such a hell of evil was in my own heart as he has roused ! ”

“Hush, Cis ; calm yourself, old fellow. His time will come at last, be sure of that, and your hour of triumph will be all the sweeter if your own hand has not helped you to it by wrong or revenge. Wise men do not break laws, and his life could bring you no satisfaction. Leave your vengeance in the hands of One who has said, ‘I will repay.’ ”

CHAPTER VII

Is it worth a dream, is it worth an hour
To think of things that are well outworn ;
Of fruitless husk and fugitive flower,
The dream foregone and the dead foreborne ?
Swinburne.

IN a room of her villa Faustine was sitting, looking with white and anxious face at the stern dark countenance of the priest as he stood before her.

“He is sure to return here,” Père Jerome was saying. “His Quixotic fancy for the child will die out with her disappearance. You will have no rival then. You know what I mean. Your husband is old ; Cecil Calverley is little changed at heart, he is still passionate and enthusiastic : your influence has fettered his life ; he has never loved again. It rests with you to win him back, and this time I place no restrictions on you. Act as you please ; keep him at your feet ; make him your lover—or husband—if you like. You are one of those women who will be always young. He looks ten years over your age now ; and he will love you again, or I know little of human nature.”

Faustine’s face blushed burning red ; her eyes drooped in momentary shame.

“You are mistaken,” she said, with a strong effort at composure. “He has no love for me now ; I know it only too well.”

“You can arouse it once again,” answered the priest with that cold and cruel smile she hated. “I think your spells are not forgotten yet.”

“Love shall be a tool in my hands no longer, even at your bidding,” she said, facing him with that imperial dignity of disdain he remembered of old. “I did this man harm enough once ; I will do so no more.”

"But if he loved you?"

Her head drooped, the fire and anger died out of her eyes. It was so sweet—that thought—and all her life had been so bitter and hard a thing.

"He does not; he never will again. Do you think a woman cannot tell when her power is dead?"

"Your power can never be dead to him. Tell him of your marriage—that it was forced upon you, or that you thought to save him. He will remember you as in the days of old; he will think of the gleam of your hair, the lustre of your eyes, the fascination of your presence. Tush! a thousand things will awaken his memory and soften his anger. Men are but wittols in a woman's hands; she can break their strength, their honour, their genius, their power as a stalk of green flax. There is no power so wide as that she holds. He will forget all that has passed; he cannot choose but forget if you bid him; and then—you may do with him as you will!"

The words swept over her heart like fire. She drew her breath sharply, as one who suffers keen physical anguish.

"O God!" she cried, "do not tempt me; do not bid me do this thing."

As the prayer burst from her lips, as her head sank on her hands in the abandonment of a sudden despair, the curtains of the doorway were swept aside, there came the sound of a hurried tread, and before their amazed and startled eyes stood Cecil Calverley!

In breathless silence they stood and gazed on each other; those three, whose lives were so strangely bound, round whom a cruel fate had spun its web of doom.

As Faustine sank back on her couch, her eyes held an intensity of terror that looked like guilt; all her beauty seemed changed and withered by a spell of deadly fear.

"So, holy father, I have found you at last?"

The blood flushed back to the face of the priest. He drew himself up with his haughtiest and coldest air.

"I am not aware that that is so difficult a matter, Mr. Calverley. I am not given to hiding myself from the eyes and knowledge of men."

"I have no wish to bandy words with you. I have sought you—tracked you—with infinite difficulty. I have been from England to Paris, from Paris to Vienna, from Vienna to Naples; now I have found you in Rome. Well, I have but one question to ask you; that is soon done. Where is the child?"

"The child! What child? I think you are mad, Mr. Calverley!"

"Mad or not, you shall not evade my question. What have you done with my ward—the child *Félice*? By Heaven! if you do not answer me——"

Something in his face struck terror to the heart of the woman whose agonised eyes took in this scene. She sprang to her feet, and involuntarily stood between him and the priest.

"Mr. Calverley, pray calm yourself," she entreated. "What do you mean by this intrusion into my house?"

Cecil drew back, and made an effort to regain his composure.

"I owe you a thousand apologies, madame. My excuse is necessity. The child I have guarded and protected all these years has been decoyed away from the home and shelter I found for her. I know whose hand has dealt this blow, and I will have my answer from his lips ere he or I leave this house."

The priest laughed his cold and slighting laugh.

"Answer! well you shall have it; but you might have asked it more courteously. Such violence is scarcely fitting for the presence of a woman. Yes, I have taken away the child from the shelter, as you term it, that you selected. I have placed her under safer and surer guardianship, and I have done this because I alone have the right to do it. I have the authority of her father for the support of my actions."

"Her *father*! You know, then, who she is?"

"I do."

Cecil's lips paled. He had not expected to be met by such a statement as this—a statement which, if true, would set aside all his claims, and nullify all his power over the young fair life he loved.

"You must prove your words," he said. "You will have to satisfy me that your claims are stronger than my own, or by Heaven I will *not* yield her up. I will appeal to the law—to——"

"The law!" scoffed the priest. "I doubt if you will gain much assistance from that. Certainly I will prove what I have said. Why should I fear? Are you prepared to hear the truth at once?"

"Yes; tell me all."

"Then *Félice* is no other than the child of my own daughter, Valerie, who married Gaspard Ducroix."

"Merciful Heaven!" uttered Cecil, as he staggered back. "Your child—Valerie d'Egmont! Then Madame de Besançon——"

"Is also my daughter. Yes; I married her mother when

I was but nineteen. I had no thought then of joining the Church."

Cecil's eyes flashed like lightning.

"But having done so you have no legal rights to wife or children. You are divorced from them. Your claims could not stand in any court of justice."

"There will be no legal question as to my rights," answered Père Jerome icily. "My daughter will not deny them, and my grandchild will have no reason to do so. I simply tell you this to show why I have withdrawn the child from your keeping. Whether you are satisfied or not, does not alter the facts of the case. Proofs! oh, you shall have proofs enough if you wish! You know where I am staying in Rome. Come to me to-night at seven o'clock. I shall be ready for you then."

He passed from the room as he spoke and left Cecil standing there dazed, stupefied, dumb. Faustine watched him with pained and eager eyes. He never seemed to think of her, to notice her presence. This news had fallen upon him like a thunderbolt. He was so totally, so utterly unprepared for anything of the sort. Félice bound by such a tie to this fiend, this arch foe, this traitor; wrenched from his own love, his own protection, her young life condemned to he knew not what, and he obliged to stand by powerless, helpless, baffled! The thought was maddening. Faustine touched his arm and roused him at last.

"Will you not sit down?" she said. "I have something to say to you. I might help you. Tell me, is this child so dear?"

"Dear!" He sank on the seat beside her and bowed his face on his hands. "She is the sole thing for which I care to live!"

A sense of sickening anguish stole over the heart of the woman who heard those words. She shivered in the heat of the bright noonday.

"She is quite safe," she said at last. "That at least I know. And if her life be of such value in your eyes, rest assured that I will do all in my power to befriend her."

"Heaven bless you!" cried Cecil passionately. "If you only knew what I have endured thinking of her fate. If that villain——"

He paused abruptly. He remembered what this man was to the pale, sad-faced woman by his side. She looked at him with weary pain-filled eyes. "I cannot rebuke your words," she said. "I think Mephistopheles himself never tempted more skilfully, plotted more infernally, ruined life and soul and reason more piteously than this man has done, whose—child—I am."

“I pity you from the bottom of my heart,” cried Cecil earnestly. For as he looked at her now, and remembered her in the past, a great wave of compassion and remorse swept over him. Now he could read the mystery of her life, the secret of her strange career. Now he knew what hand had pulled the strings of this poor helpless puppet. Now he saw the ruin that had been wrought, the wrong that had been dealt to her, and he knew that beyond all power of help, all tenderness of consolation, was the heart of this woman he had once so madly loved.

She sank down on the low couch by his side, and on her face and in her eyes was an anguish of suffering that moved him to the depths of his soul. He kept silence because of the very powerlessness of words; he felt nothing could assuage her bitterness, or soothe her shame-filled thoughts, or in any way help her in the tortures of this hour. Suddenly a tempest of tears rushed to her eyes; she threw herself before him in the utter abandonment of an hysterical passion that mastered all reason and defied all control.

“Now do you know why I could not accept your love? Now do you see why I preferred you should think me all that was false, treacherous, vile, sooner than link my life with yours, and let you share its degradation? Oh, Cecil, you thought I had no love for you. No love? My God! and all these years roll back like a dream, and I only remember your words as you knelt at my feet in the woods that summer morning. I only know that to save *you*, I sacrificed my whole life’s peace.”

He heard, and as he heard all the bitterness and hardness melted from his heart; he was smitten deeper than by any rebuke at the thought of how he had misjudged this woman kneeling at his feet, of how much nobility and greatness had been in her nature, when he had deemed her the most selfish and heartless of her sex.

He laid his hand on the beautiful bowed head; his own voice grew husky with emotion as he gazed at her and spoke.

“My God! how I have wronged you!”

“It does not matter,” she sobbed, “nothing does, I think. To-day I seem to have reached the limits of my endurance. I can bear no more. I knew that one day you would know, and then you would forget to condemn me, for was I not right? What could I have brought you, save misery and shame? What would your life have been, once bound to mine? And yet—oh, Heaven knows how hard the trial was! I thought my heart would have broken long ago—long ago.”

“And I thought mine—had,” he answered, while a sudden mist dimmed his eyes and shut out the kneeling figure from

his sight. "You killed my trust, my faith, my love, though that was hardest of all to destroy. I have had nothing but bitter thoughts of you all these years. If only you could have been frank with me then—if only you had told me your reasons."

"I could not," she said between her sobs. "I was bound by an oath never to reveal what—he—was to me. His own lips betrayed the secret a few minutes ago, or I should have been silent still. If you knew what my life has been——"

"I can imagine it only too well," said Cecil pityingly.

"I could not take your faith, your love, and keep you in error," she went on. "I was too proud, and I—loved—you too well. I can say so now, for that old foolish dream is so far away, and you—you will be happy yet."

"Never that—again," he answered her sadly. "My dream and my youth passed away together. They are buried in too deep a grave for any resurrection. Content, peace, I may find, but happiness—it died out with the summer night that brought me your last message."

Her heart throbbed, her pulses thrilled like fire, she felt dizzy with an instant's rapture of remembrance. He had indeed loved her well. Her sobs ceased; she lifted her head, and the loosened masses of her hair fell round her like a cloud. Her eyes were red with weeping, but they shone with the lustre of an intense and heartfelt love, and his own softened with an infinite yearning as he met their gaze, and thought of all she had borne and endured for the sake of that fatal passion which had wrecked the lives of both.

His nature was long-suffering and generous. He was deeply moved, though now no throb of passion stirred within his heart, and he was remembering what she had forgotten—that she was the wife of another man. Love to a woman is the very essence of self-abandonment, to a man the very essence of selfishness. It is not their fault. Nature has made them so, and neither one nor other is quite capable of judging of their respective emotion. The capacity for feeling is so widely different, and what in a woman craves for sympathy and is born of sentiment, in a man is chiefly sensual, and craves for returning passion. You will seldom or never find a man who will continue caring for someone who can be nothing to him in return; but many women will love for their whole life long when once their love is given, though the object of that love be absent or unapproachable, or never has been, or never can be, their own.

"You will pardon me now, at last," she said. "You will see I was not quite so much to blame as you thought."

"I see you are all that is most noble and most great," he

answered earnestly. "Do not kneel there; it is no place for you. You should not be a suppliant at the feet of any man."

"Save *you*," she answered softly, and then her eyes fell; she had not strength to look at him.

She moved away to her seat again, and he sat there, with his face pale and troubled, and his mind full of a host of conflicting emotions.

"The past cannot be recalled," he said at last, "its sins and errors are alike unalterable, but no words can tell how I pity you, when I think of you bound to that man."

"You may well say that, though even you can hardly fathom the depths of misery to which I have sunk, the shame to which I have lent myself, the treachery which has ruined so many lives that might have been glad, and great, and hopeful, but for me."

"And his object?"

A bitter smile curled her lips.

"Can you ask? The noblest and best of all, of course—the cause of the Church, whose coffers he helped to fill, whose power he helped to spread, whose honours he wished to purchase for himself. Well, he has done that; he has rank and power now, bought with his victims' curses, and preserved by blood and shame. I have been steeped in evil—evil masked as righteousness, and gilded by specious sophistries. For years past I have been trying to break my chains. I cannot do it. The taint of crime seems ever on me. I have no hope, no joy; nothing that is not coloured by the blackness of some evil doing. Oh, if I could but die; Cecil! If you only knew how unutterably weary I am of all that is called life!"

He looked at her with an infinite pity. In no hour of sovereignty or enchantment had she seemed to him so fair, and so womanly, as in this hour of her remorse and her despair.

"It is only the shadow of another's shame that touches you," he said gently, "none of your own. What could you have done?"

"Ah yes; what could I have done? that was just it. I was bound hand and foot ere I knew a fetter had touched me. I was captive in a power that knows no relenting ere I knew that power was about my life. Oh, my God! when I think of the wasted years, I am desperate enough for anything."

"Is it too late to help yourself now?"

"Too late?—it will always be that for me. When I had the credulous innocence of childhood I was taught my lesson first. I learned it so well that I can never again unlearn it

while life lasts. It all looked so noble and so fair then. I had dreams that were fostered, ambitions that were fed by subtlest power ; all my actions were gilded with the pretence of freedom, until I myself never knew for years the slave I really was. I was promised sovereignty—empire, power. Oh, I laugh now at my own wild folly for believing such fables and accepting such ignominy. When I discovered the reality, it was too late. I could not change my life, nor one single thing about it. Dreams? Ah! when did dreams like mine ever find fruition, save in dishonour, or—the grave! My taskmaster was merciless ; and, while I believed in him, I was wax in his hands. Since I have ceased to do that, I have struggled to free myself in some degree from his power—to escape his tyranny. It is useless. To my life's end they are about me now !”

Cecil did not speak ; he was too deeply moved. Her life seemed all so plain before him at last. The mysteries and the evils of it were so easy to read. He understood something of her misery and her shame, and, with the loyal chivalry of old, his heart went out to her in an impulse of purest compassion.

“How you have been sinned against!” he murmured involuntarily. “Oh! if I had but known——”

“What could you have done?” she asked, looking sadly up at his face. “No one could have helped me then ; no one can help me now. I must suffer and endure to the bitter end. One thing alone has made me glad—that, in your sight, I am at last able to remove the mask ; to show you what I have been, what I am.”

“And from my very soul I ask your pardon for all the wrong I have done you by my thoughts,” he said earnestly. “Never while I live will I believe ill of you again.”

“Thank you for those words ; and now let us speak no more of myself. There is the child to be thought of, considered. You do not know where she is?”

“No. Would to Heaven I did !”

“She is in a convent,” said Faustine, her cheek paling before the eagerness of those words, the thought of how this girl would surely usurp her place in the heart of the man who had been her lover once, whom she loved still, to whom she would never now be anything. “I cannot tell you where ; but she is safe and kindly treated. I will manage to see her soon. Have you any message I can take from yourself to cheer her?”

“I should like to write a letter if you can contrive that she shall get it,” Cecil answered. “But I must wait first till I hear what Père Jerome has to tell me, and see the proofs he spoke of.”

“ They are strong enough,” sighed Faustine wearily. “ The child’s life may be fettered as mine has been, if means cannot be found to save her soon.”

“ God help her ! ” cried Cecil passionately. “ Oh, madame, promise me your aid ; promise that the child shall be saved from the power of this fiend—for what else is he?—and I will bless and thank you every hour I live ! ”

“ You love her very dearly——”

“ I love her as the one thing that kept life and hope in my heart through years of bitterest misery. I love her as one loves what is young, and pure, and helpless. That is all.”

Faustine looked at him long and silently. “ All,” and a sad little smile parted her lips. “ Yes, all now, perhaps. But there will be more some day. Yes, I will help you if I die for it. I wronged you once. As there is a heaven above us I will not rest until I have atoned for that wrong, or avenged it ! ”

Then she passed from his presence without another word.

CHAPTER VIII

“ CAN I ESCAPE ? ”

The sound of iron-footed years,
And all the oppression that is done
Under the sin.

CECIL went out into the streets like a man in a dream. The hurried and confused events of the last few weeks had bewildered his brain. He longed to think clearly and calmly, but that seemed impossible, for his feelings had been stirred to their deepest depths, and all the bitterness he had cherished these years past against the woman he had loved in his passionate youth, was swept away for ever now that he had seen her in her sorrow, and knew of her long sufferings. He had worshipped and loved her with all youth’s mad idolatry, he met her now in the chastened calm and passive coldness of manhood, a manhood that had held no soft or tender thoughts of women since that first betrayal at their hands.

What he felt for Félise was widely different from the hot wild passion that had filled his whole life to the brim once, and absorbed its every thought and feeling. He had prayed

to hate the woman who had deceived him, to cast her memory out of his heart, but he had not been able to do either one or other. Forgetfulness is not always possible even when most desired, and a great love, like a great wrong, will often throw its shadows across a whole existence.

Now that he had learnt the truth from her own lips, now that he saw from what she had saved him, an intense pity swept over his soul. He felt all the hardness and coldness had melted. She had been in reality his saviour when he had but deemed her a temptress and a deceiver. He almost shuddered as he thought of what his life would have been had he indeed made her his wife and learnt, too late, that she was but a tool in the hands of his foe. She had been wiser than he, he saw it now, and blessed her in his heart; and in place of the wild love and the bitter anger of yore, there stole back the softness of an intense pity and the freedom of a great relief. He took his way back to his own home, treading the streets by instinct, while his brain ached and his heart was thronged with a thousand shapes and memories of the past. Even the thought of *Félice* now was one of torture. She was no longer his to guard and cherish, and all her innocent evidence of affection for himself was so much added bitterness. If the priest's words were true—and he could scarcely doubt them, even with all his hatred and mistrust—she would be utterly severed from him in the future. Even that one pure and gentle interest, that one tie whose innocence and holiness had kept life from being utterly blank through those sad years of exile were to be snatched from him by the same ruthless hand that had stolen the joys of his youth, and poisoned the hopes of his manhood.

And he could do nothing—nothing. The impotence and weakness of his own power almost maddened him, as alone in his chamber he thought of these things and felt the evil passions of revenge and hatred fighting once again for mastery.

“Shall I never free myself from that accursed fiend?” he groaned aloud, and despair made him well-nigh desperate. The dark shadows rolled back over his life once more, and coloured all the long hours that still lay between him and the interview the priest had promised.

When *Félice* at last recovered from that stupor of exhaustion and fear, she found herself in another cell. The moonlight was streaming in through the bars of the little window, and a dim oil lamp burned in a corner. The cell was poorly furnished, but looked more comfortable than that in which she had been previously incarcerated. She moved

to a sitting position and looked round. She was quite alone. Some bread and fruit and a flask of water stood on a little table, and throughout the entire building an intense stillness reigned.

The girl felt weak and exhausted. She ate some of the bread and drank with feverish eagerness the cold clear water beside her. Then she looked long and eagerly at the tiny barred window and marvelled whether escape was possible. By placing her chair on the bed, she managed to reach it and look out. The clear silvery light showed her only a stretch of level plains, and far off a range of hills, faint and blue against the soft line of the sky.

She had no idea of where she was, save that it was in France, and an intense dread and hopelessness stole over her as she looked from out of her prison chamber, and remembered the threats that had vowed her life to such captivity as this.

“But they shall not make me a nun; I will die first,” she cried passionately but determinedly. “Oh, Cecil, where are you? If I could only tell you, I am sure you would help me.”

She had such implicit faith in him. A word—a sign from her, and she felt he would be by her side. And then? Why, strong in his sheltering love and protection, she would bid defiance to her persecutor—would refuse to obey him for another hour.

But how could she tell him? What possibility was there of a message reaching him?

She dismounted and pushed away the chair, and threw herself down on her hard pallet, while a fresh paroxysm of weeping shook her like a reed in a storm. She was full of terror, of agony, of despair. The unknown horrors that awaited her seemed magnified tenfold. At last, exhausted by the violence of emotion, she fell into a sort of stupor that was less merciful than sleep, for the keenness of physical anguish was deadened, but the tortures of the mind were as sharp and full of terror as ever.

With the morning she was in a violent fever, and the sisters who tended her were alarmed. They had had orders to treat her with every kindness and consideration, and they carried out their instructions to the letter; but for a week her life and reason lay in the balance, and all their skill and care seemed of no effect. But after a time youth and strength asserted themselves and claimed the victory.

Weak and fragile as an infant, she lay at last in the calm and healing sleep that had won back consciousness to the brain, and life to the feeble frame.

One of the sisters, a pale, young, sad-faced nun, whose interest in the lovely child had been strongest from the first, watched beside her all through that long night of the crisis, ready to minister to her slightest want, gentle and careful as her own mother might have been.

"Poor child, poor girl!" she murmured tenderly, gazing at the closed lids, the snow-white face; "it is cruel to chain you here. Heaven send you the freedom and peace that I have lost."

It was to this sister that Félise was most deeply attracted in the wearisome days of languor and convalescence that followed; and it was to her that she confided her misery and her dread.

Sœur Stéphanie, as she was called, had only taken the veil two years before. In a moment of unguarded confidence she let the child see something of the anguish and desolation of her own life; but for that rashness she did bitter penance, and never again did she betray anything of her real feelings. Félise herself knew of no cause for restraint. She poured out her woes and agony with wild and frenzied emotion, she implored Sœur Stéphanie to befriend her, to aid her, only to let some word of her fate get to Cecil Calverley's ears, and then he would come and save her, she felt sure.

The nun assured her it was impossible. That no letter or message could by any means be conveyed from the convent without the Superior's knowledge. Then a sort of despair came over the girl. She spoke no more; only lay there with closed eyes and white set lips, a living statue of despair, a sight so sad to see that it often wrung tears from the pitying eyes of the young nun. But what could she do? She knew she was utterly helpless, she knew that even the fact of concealing Félise's mad petitions would be accounted a dreadful sin; but she could not find it in her heart to betray the poor child's wild confessions.

The days drifted on and Félise slowly recovered. She was able to breathe the outer air once more, and walk about the convent grounds leaning on Sœur Stéphanie's arm. Once breathing the fresh air and seeing the golden sunshine, the old longing for escape grew fiercer and more intense in the girl's breast. The convent walls were not high, the great trees that overhung them seemed to offer a prospect of assistance. The chief obstacles lay in the vigilance of those around and the fact of her never being alone for a single moment.

The chance of escape by the outer gate at such times as the sisters were at meals, or in the chapel, then presented

itself. There were two portresses, both old women, and Félise had seen one of them sleeping at her post many a time. When any visitors came, which was very rare, the outer portress rang a bell, and the inner one had then to summon the receiving nun. Each nun took this duty in turns for the day, and having learnt the business or desire of the visitor, ushered them into a room specially set apart for that purpose.

After considering the latter project the girl gave it up as too difficult to be managed, but that of escaping by the grounds seemed more feasible, only it was necessary to throw her spies off their guard, or to bribe or cajole Sœur Stéphanie into rendering her assistance in the matter. But a new difficulty now threatened. The Superior called her to her private room one morning and explained that being now convalescent it would be necessary for her to commence, without further delay, to learn the duties of a novice and adapt herself to the life of her companions.

Félise was horror-struck at the announcement. Her first feeling was one of passionate rebellion ; then prudence stepped in, and she saw that she must pretend to yield in order to advance in any way her own designs.

With beating heart and paling check she listened, and at the conclusion of her harangue the Superior summoned an old Franciscan monk, who, she said, was to give her daily instructions until such time as she was fit to take the vows.

This was almost more than Félise could bear ; she had never dreamt of going through such fearful ordeals, but she was young and brave, and despair lent her strength now that her resolve had become so fixed and determined a thing. She accepted all the Superior said with apparent meekness and obedience, but she went out from her presence with the agony and desperation of a hunted thing that looks on all sides and sees but traps and pursuers.

That night she seemed so ill and weak that Sœur Stéphanie offered to stay with her. The desperate resolve had come to the girl's mind to ask the aid of the only creature who seemed to compassionate her sufferings, and when darkness and silence alone reigned throughout the convent she roused herself from her stupor of mingled weakness and agony, and prayed the nun to listen to her tale, and hear it under a promise of secrecy. Sœur Stéphanie was startled and alarmed, but the tears and entreaties of the poor forsaken child touched her deeply, the more so as the life she herself led was one of no voluntary choice, and one against which she had long rebelled in secret.

"Indeed, I would help you if I could," she whispered soothingly, as she glanced at the door in a sudden panic; for eaves-dropping was an established rule, and no one sister dared ever give confidence to another. "But you must be calm and not give way like this. Do you think you are the only one who has had to suffer, the only one who has been torn from life's joys, and condemned to this living death that I endure? Oh, my God! if you knew my story, you would know how its misery dwarfs the sorrows of your own."

"You too have suffered—you are not here of your own free will?" said Félise wonderingly as she dashed the tears from her eyes and looked at the pale face that might once have been fair as her own; the sad eyes, whose lustre tears had dimmed and anguish deadened. "I thought you were at least—happy!"

"Happy!" the bitterness of the tone spoke out the truth of all her heart held. "I was but a child when I first came here. I had lived with my father since my mother's death. They were Italians, and I their only child. I do not know what my father's occupation was. He was often away, and sometimes we were very rich and lived in great hotels, and I had beautiful clothes and jewels, and we were so happy. At others he seemed quite poor, and my mother would weep and look so sad, and we would live only in one room, and then again a change would come. I did not understand or think about it then. I was about eight years old when my mother died. A life like I had led sharpens the wits and opens the eyes of any child. I was precocious beyond my years, and after my mother's death I and my father were never parted. How we loved each other! His absences were neither so long nor so frequent now. He seemed restless and unhappy often, but he was always so good, so tender to me. At last, when I was about twelve years of age, he suddenly told me that we must part for a long time. I knelt at his feet; I implored him to take me with him. He said it was impossible. He brought me to a house; where he said I would be safely and kindly treated until his return, and then in an agony of grief I saw him depart. I have never seen him again!"

"He—did he die?" faltered the girl pityingly.

"I think not; I was told he had forsaken me. I was brought thither. I was in the power of a gaoler who would neither release nor aid me. I struggled for long but it was useless; a silence as of the grave fell between me and the outer world, a great despair and heart-sickness came over me. I was condemned to take the veil, and that by one of the hardest and most pitiless of the race, whose

power can blight, and has blighted, men's and women's lives. What arts, what designs, both gentle and violent, were used, I could not tell you now, nor would the years that followed be records fitted for ears so pure. God help those who think these retreats holy, and Heaven preserve those aching, sorrowing souls who seek them as a refuge against the sins and temptings of the world! My trials were almost too heavy to endure, but I have endured them. I shall do so now until the end. Our Blessed Lady grant that may be near. See how shrunk and wasted I am,” and she pulled up the sleeves of her black gown and showed the thin transparent arm. “I have but the hope to die as my mother died,” she went on rapidly. “That is all I long for now.”

Félice looked with unspeakable compassion at the slender kneeling figure. Her own grief was half forgotten as she thought of the living tragedy of this young forsaken life.

“Why you have been brought thither, or for what purpose, I do not know,” the sister continued. “But I pity you with all my heart. You talk of escape; I had ideas as wild once. I grew hopeless and passive at last. You will do the same.”

“Oh no, oh no!” cried Félice passionately. “I could not. I would sooner die!”

Two feverish spots burned in her cheeks, and her eyes glowed like fire. “What do you purpose doing?” asked Sœur Stéphanie compassionately.

“I do not know. I have scarcely thought, but escape from here I must. There is one who loves me, who has been the best friend, the only friend of my life. If he knew—if I could go to him!”

“We are a day's journey from Paris,” said the sister thoughtfully. “But I suppose you have no money?”

“No,” answered the girl despondingly. “It was all taken from me when I was ill.”

“And I cannot help you,” said Sœur Stéphanie. “There is an address in Paris I could give you of a friend of my father's. They might assist you for—his sake. But—to get there?”

“I would walk night and day. I am stronger than you think.”

The nun shook her head. “It would scarcely be possible, my child. But you might get a lift in some market-cart or waggon, and that you would have to accept at a risk, for the peasantry are in utter submission to the priests, and would give you up the instant it was demanded of them.”

Félice clasped her hands despairingly. “Is there no way—none?” she cried.

There was a moment's silence. Then Sœur Stephanie looked up, her pale face illumined by a sudden light.

"Listen," she said. "I have thought of a way. Bend your ear down—so—close to my lips. Heaven knows we need be cautious now."

BOOK V

CHAPTER I

IN THE NET

. . . . Yea, no thing that is
 Seems pleasant to me.
Swinburne.

PUNCTUALLY at the time appointed Cecil Calverley took his way to the abode of Père Jerome.

It was a hot windless night, and the song of a fountain, the sound of a guitar, alone broke the intense stillness. A full bright moon shone in the deep lovely azure of the sky; from a garden that he passed broke forth the passionate music of a nightingale's song, and it smote him to the heart, with that sickness of remembered pain that lies in the depths of any memory we would fain forget, or believe forgotten.

It was with such memories in his heart that Cecil entered the presence of the priest.

"You have no desire to waste time in beating about the bush, Mr. Cecil, I suppose?" said Père Jerome coolly, as he bowed in return to his visitor's salute. "No—I thought as much. Well, you desired proofs of my right to this child, whom you succoured in her infancy. Will you read these papers?"

Cecil took up the documents offered to him, and scrutinised them eagerly. They were copies of a marriage certificate and baptismal register, with the names in full that the priest had borne in his non-monastical youth—names which startled Cecil, as he read in them the titles and honours which had been forfeited for sake of the Church now served.

"I show you these for your own satisfaction," continued the priest calmly; "not that you have any right to demand it."

"I have always understood," said Cecil, laying down the

papers and confronting his enemy with flashing eyes, "that when you entered the Church of Rome you divorced yourself from all other ties. You have no civil rights any longer; your authority over wife or child ceases, unless they choose to give voluntary submission. I have been the sole protector and guardian of this girl from her childhood upwards to the present hour. I demand that she herself choose between us. If she gives the preference to your claim, I say no more; but if, on the other hand, she chooses to abide by my wishes and directions, then she shall do so, and you may try your uttermost to prevent it."

"Bold words!" said the priest with his coldest smile. "And if I refuse to comply with your demand?"

"I will wrest her from your power by force; you shall not chain her young life to the miseries of a living tomb. Do you hear? you *shall* not! I am no longer a boy to be trifled with, and the debt I owe you is one long enough and dark enough, Heaven knows; but cross me in this thing, and, as there is a God above us, it will be the worst hour of your life!"

"Your language is melodramatic, but irrational, and I credited you with better taste than to threaten," answered Père Jerome with a slight smile. "You would find it no easy matter to 'wrest the child from my keeping,' as you express it. We have places of refuge too secluded and too secure for even legal power to discover. As for the personal violence you threaten—well—you best know how that would further your wishes. For my part, I fail to see it, unless you are ambitious of a taste of prison discipline wherewith to vary your romantic life."

Cecil drew his breath sharp, and his strong hand clenched itself involuntarily. He longed to silence those jibing lips and strike back their mockery with the fury they had roused. In that moment all the intensity of his hate revived, and the fire of up-leaping passions burned in his heart, and maddened him with the longing for vengeance and the memory of unextinguished wrongs.

The priest read the conflict; it only amused him. He was so safe himself, his intricate nets had no single loose mesh by which his prey could escape. What did he care for the empty wind-bags of threats, or the fiery passion of defiance!

There was a long silence, during which the two men gazed at each other as if measuring their respective powers of forbearance.

Cecil spoke at last.

"You refuse, then, to give me any information respecting this child, to let me see her even once more?"

"Once more," said the priest musingly and with that glitter in his eyes that Cecil knew so well. "Well, I won't be too hard upon you. Yes, you shall see her *once more* if you wish. You shall see her when she makes public confession of her faith, when in preference to a lover's arms, she chooses the shelter and peace of the cloister, when in the loveliness of youth and the sweetness of life's dawning hours she bars herself from all their false allurements. Yes, you shall see her *then*. I promise you!"

"You hound, you devil!" burst from Cecil's lips. "Would you make me a murderer, despite myself?"

The low-breathed words bore a meaning of menace too deadly to be disregarded, yet too sudden to be warded off. He made one spring forward, his hand was on the throat of his foe, and all the brute instinct of unsparing hate was surging through his veins.

This man had been the bane, the tempter, the betrayer, the poisoner of his life. He had no thought at that moment save to kill this hateful existence and it would have seemed but bare justice. Yet, even in that mad moment, even as his hand closed on the throat that had uttered those words of mockery and defiance, his grasp relaxed, he drew suddenly back.

"You would make me vile as yourself," he muttered with panting breath. "I have no desire to sink to your level—yet!"

And not daring to look, or trust his strength for further words, he left the room and rushed into the open street once more.

"I might have murdered him," he said to himself, while the blood boiled in his veins and his temples beat dizzily as he moved along. "Would it have been less a crime than he has committed, or threatens? By Heaven! I doubt it!"

In the "sweet hot calm of the summer night, he went onwards through the streets of Rome. He took no heed of where his steps were leading him. He had no thought but of the tiger fury that had surged through his veins and made him in instinct, if not in actual deed, a criminal. "Does God indeed repay?" he muttered, as his eyes gazed up to where the lustre of the stars filled all the cloudless sky. "The time seems so long—so long—and what does life hold for me now?"

He bowed his head in the hopelessness of an intense despair; mechanically he moved on, hearing voices, seeing figures, but taking outward note of nothing. A figure flitted by in the radiant moonlight, and the light linen skirts

brushed against him in the narrow street. The touch seemed in some way to rouse him ; he started and looked up. The girl was in advance of himself, and paused at the entrance of a house close to one of the bridges. As she laid her hand on the latch she turned her face towards him, the moonlight fell full upon it. Cecil started as if he had been shot. Involuntarily he sprang forwards : "Félice, is it you ?"

The girl gave him one startled glance and fled through the dusky porch and was lost to sight. Cecil stood there trembling in every limb. The surprise was so great and sudden, it had unnerved him.

"I must know. I must be sure," he said, and summoning up courage he knocked at the door without an instant's delay. An old woman, smelling strongly of garlic, answered him.

"The young signora who had just gone in ? Oh ! she was the granddaughter of her lodger. Who was he ? Why, an old *maestro*, who gained his living by teaching music, that was all, and the signora was a singer, or going to be a singer, and music was in the house from morn till night. For her part, she had rather too much of it ; the saints forbid she should speak against the beautiful things she heard, but then one wants a little peace and quietness sometimes. Lived there long ? Oh yes, for years now. The name ? Well, the old man's name was Marco Rosa, his grandchild's would of course be the same, at least she had supposed so, and never asked. Could they be seen ? Well, she would ascertain. Would the *Eccellenza* leave his name ? No. Well, she would tell the old man. Would the illustrious stranger wait in the *loggia* ? She would not detain him long."

Cecil nodded, glad to get rid of his garrulous informant.

In a minute or two she returned. "The old man was ill, and could see no one ; the young lady was busy attending to him, and begged to be excused."

That was all. Cecil looked as he felt, rather confused ; and slipping some silver into the woman's hand, went away.

Of course it was only a chance likeness. What else should it be ? He smiled at his folly, and then went back along the close narrow street, and called a vehicle and drove off to Faustine's villa.

She was in, and he was at once admitted. He found her sitting in the grassy *pleasaunce* beyond the court. A clock chimed nine. Through the fragrant darkness of the trees came ever and anon the gleam of stars and moon. The dew glistened on the grass and silvered the purple blossoms of the passion-flowers. Like one weary and spent from a long fray, Cecil came forward through the shadowy garden-

ways, and threw himself beside the woman, whose tender eyes looked softly back to his own.

"I think I am mad to-night," he said to her. "Tell me, is there anything in life worth living for? I have begun to doubt it at last."

"What has happened?" she asked wonderingly.

"What?" and he laughed bitterly. "Only that I wonder I have not come here with the stain of blood upon my hands and the brand of Cain upon my brow. I wonder what saved me?"

He leant his head on his hand, and shuddered as he spoke. As she looked on him her eyes grew dim, and her heart throbbed with a passionate pain. What would she not have given to throw her arms round his neck and bid him be comforted? What would she not have sacrificed to know that it lay in her power now to soothe his sufferings, or give him a moment's joy?

Alas, alas! Is there any bitterness to a woman like that which comes with the knowledge that the power she once held has passed from her hands for ever?

She calmed herself by a strong effort; she put aside the mad longings of her heart, and spoke with a gentleness that was almost cold. "Tell me all," she said. "You do not think—I—at least will misjudge you?"

He raised his haggard face and looked at her then. "No," he said wearily; "I do not think you will; you do not revenge my past blindness on my head."

She shivered as with sudden cold.

"The past is a sealed book, let us never speak of it more. What is done is done! Let me hear what troubles you now."

And with bent head and paling lips he told her all.

"Do you blame me?" he asked at last.

"How can I?" she said sadly; "you have been sorely tried, and you are but human. I wonder why he hates you so?"

"God knows," answered Cecil wearily; "he has cursed my life like an evil fate. But I have one thing more to tell you, madame. As I was passing along one of the streets by the Casa I saw a girl pass into one of the houses. For a moment I thought she was Félise herself. I never saw so startling a likeness. I spoke to her in my surprise, but I am afraid I startled her. She hurried into a house, and I could not refrain from making inquiries respecting her. I learnt that she is the grandchild of an old musician, and is herself a singer—that——"

"Stop!" interrupted Faustine hurriedly. "I know the girl. What of her?"

"You know her?" echoed Cecil in surprise. "Well, I was about to say, madame, that her likeness to Félise is so marvellously strong I cannot forget it; she might be her double."

Faustine's face flushed and paled.

"A thought has struck me," she said. "You remember my sister had two children, twin girls, and that Lord Danvers tried in vain to trace them after their disappearance from Alsace?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"You remember also that the clue he followed always turned on a man with *one* child?"

"Of course; I used to joke him about the detective he employed."

"Well, cannot you see what I mean? This girl first attracted my attention by her likeness to Valerie, my poor sister. I spoke to her and tried to learn her history. She is not really the grandchild of this old man. He saved her from the power of some wretch of an Italian, who was going to bring her up for a dancer. He half killed her with ill-usage, and the old musician helped her to escape. She has lived with him ever since. He has trained her voice and taught her music, and some great patron of his, the Prince Sanfriano, has promised to bring her out at Milan at the Opera. They told me all this, and I, knowing Sanfriano's reputation, tried to persuade them to refuse his assistance. But the old man will hear no ill of him, and though I begged them to let me use my influence in their behalf, they would not listen."

"The old man is ill, I heard," said Cecil eagerly. "Your story interests me powerfully, madame. Supposing your ideas should be true, and, after all, this girl is the long-missing sister?"

"That fact can be soon ascertained," answered Faustine. "I will seek them out, and learn more than they told me the other night. If my surmises are true, and the girl is really my own niece——"

"Your niece!" cried Cecil involuntarily. "Oh Heavens! I forgot! There will be another victim for Père Jerome's machinations."

"Nay, I think you may trust me. I will say no word of this to him."

"What, then, has become of the implicit obedience you once told me you were bound to yield?" asked Cecil ironically.

"Ah, true. I was so blind then, so easily led. But the years have changed me, and he knows he dare not force me

beyond a certain point. Sometimes I think he fears me, for indeed my wrongs are terrible."

"They must be," murmured Cecil compassionately. "Oh, if I could free you, and myself! Is there no way out of this net of infamy?"

"None, I fear," she answered sadly. "As for myself, my whole life has been open to misconstruction and to calumny. In all that life, among all those I have known, I think no one has treated me with courtesy or consideration, save—you."

"And I judged you so hardly once!"

"I never blamed you, not for one single moment. I knew the worst you believed of me the better it would be for yourself. My name was stained too deeply for anything to wash away its imputed guilt, and that knowledge made me hard and reckless. My very talents were squandered on the lowest grades of an art, whose higher summit I might have touched. Over all the pages of my youth was written a lie that no word or deed of mine could efface. Is it any wonder I grew mad and reckless, that I let the world say what it would, and condoned its calumnies? Men! Oh yes; their love was a thing to be proud of indeed! Forgive me, I grow bitter when I think of those dead years. Forget them I never can!"

"And when you—married?" asked Cecil gently.

She started. Her face looked ghastly, as one quivering ray of moonlight fell across it through the stirring boughs.

"Why speak of that?" she said. "I did no wrong to him at least. He knew all of me that there was to know. He wooed me as his mistress, of course. When he found I would not listen, he made me his wife. I accepted him at the bidding of the power that had ruled and ruined my life. He cared for me—in a way, I believe. And I have been faithful as the world counts fidelity, while heart and soul cried out against my bondage, and I despised myself each hour I lived. O God, forgive me! why do I tell you this? What can it be to you?" and, as the words escaped her lips an agony of weeping shook all the calmness of her nature, and moved him to the heart as he looked at her.

"It is so—much—to me," he said gently, "that I would be your friend if I might; that if I could aid or save you from one pang of suffering I would do it at any cost. It is so—little—to me that I can do nothing for you now, since you have placed an irrevocable barrier between my compassion and your sorrows; since looking at you I see no longer the woman I loved, but the wife of—another man."

She cowered as if a blow had struck her, and all her

long-borne misery and all the horrors of her erring life seemed to sweep over her in that moment like a wave whose force is resistless.

"O God!" she moaned. "If I could die—if only I could die!"

"An odd wish, *ma belle*; and a strange occasion for it," said a mocking voice behind her at the same moment.

She sprang to her feet, while a faint low cry of terror escaped her lips.

"*Mon Dieu!* It is my husband!"

Cecil rose also.

"I fear my visit is somewhat ill-timed," sneered the Count de Besançon, surveying them with glittering eyes. "The little vaudeville you were acting so charmingly seems adapted only for a *solitude à deux*. I played the part of an inadvertent audience. With your permission, madame, I will attend you to the house. Monsieur Calverley, it is many years since we met; I cannot permit you to depart so soon. I will return immediately. May I request the favour of your awaiting me here?"

Cecil bowed. He was too much astonished and bewildered for words. He scarcely marvelled even at the new and spiteful trick Fate had played him.

A great cold and sickness came over Faustine as she accompanied her husband. Gainsay him she dared not at that moment. His face frightened her with its marble pallor and the merciless look in the eyes that gleamed beneath their thick white brows.

"You are mistaken in what you think," she said hurriedly, gaining courage from the very desperation of her case. "Mr. Calverley only came to see me on business. Pray permit me to explain."

"Business is not usually discussed between a lady and gentleman at such an unorthodox hour, in a moonlit garden," sneered the Count. "Do not trouble yourself with inventions, madame. I have long suspected you. Oh ho! you were so cold, you paragon of wives and matrons, who set herself in judgment against the very sisterhood of frailty from which I was fool enough to raise her! Cold! Has your lover found you so, my dainty dame? Well, he has seen the last of you, if that is any consolation."

"What do you mean?" gasped Faustine, clinging to his arm in sudden terror. "You do not, you would not——"

"Kill him? Of a surety I would. *You* may forget your honour, madame; I avenge mine."

"In the name of Heaven, listen," implored Faustine. "There has been nothing—nothing between Mr. Calverley

and myself. I have seen him but three times since I came to Rome. Ask others, if you do not believe me. My household will tell you I speak the truth ; and to-night he came from Père Jerome to tell me something that is of great concern, that was all. Upon my soul I swear it !”

He laughed brutally.

“ Do you think at my years I would credit a woman’s oath when she has to screen the man she loves ? *Pas si bête !* Go indoors—and make me no more scenes !”

But he spoke to deaf ears. With a faint gasping cry she sank on the cold marble of the terrace, and lay there unconscious of all around.

He summoned her maids, and then went back to the gardens to meet Cecil Calverley. His fury was beyond the relief even of speech. The demon of jealousy had entered his soul, and he was mad with the insensate rage of an Othello.

“ I have but few words to say to you, monsieur,” he muttered hoarsely. “ Between us there can be but one explanation,” and he struck him on the cheek with his open palm, and laughed aloud.

CHAPTER II

“ I HAVE—LOVED—YOU ”

Oh, beware, my lord, of jealousy,
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on,

Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmation strong
As proofs of Holy Writ.

MIDWAY between four and five of the morning, when the first smile of day rippled over the soft sea-blue of the sky, and the air was cool and clear as a watercourse in spring, Cecil Calverley stood under the deep broad shadows of one of the least frequented walks in the gardens of the Colonna Palace.

It was intensely still ; the warm radiance of the sun had scarcely touched the roofs and towers of the Immortal City, and the blue line of the far-off hills was yet dusk and grey.

The shadows fell on his calm face with its impassive composure and weary eyes—eyes that looked up to the warm living radiance that the dawn was bringing in its train, as though they took their last farewell of all the loveliness of earth.

“ After all, I have little to regret,” he thought. “ And no one loves me, I think, save only the child, and for her I could do nothing. Death, after all, may be kinder than life.”

His second, a young artist of whom he had but slight knowledge, yet whose services he had been hastily compelled to request, approached him now.

“ They are coming,” he said briefly.

A dark flush stained Cecil’s face. The memory of that insult set his blood on fire, and despite his own aversion to the practice of licensed murder, he knew that there was but one way he could answer that foul indignity.

A strange feeling came over him as he stood there and watched the preliminaries between the seconds. He felt like a spectator, not an actor in the scene. He seemed to be standing apart and looking on at it all, and on *himself*, as he faced that white-haired man with his chill smile and dark eyes that glowed like fire beneath their thick white brows. Like a lightning-flash came back the memory of that night in Deauville, where they had both been rivals for love of the same woman. He remembered his mistrust, his instinctive dislike to this man; had it been a prescience of future evil?

Once again, like a dream, there rose before him the sloping terrace and dewy lawn of the moonlit garden, on his ear thrilled the passionate music of the nightingale’s song, and again he heard the slow deep measure of the rolling waves. The sheen and lustre of stars seemed quivering through the haze of foliage, his brain beat dizzily, his heart throbbed with strange unsteady beats. A voice spoke to him; a pistol was placed in his hand, and with a start he awoke as a dreamer wakes, and saw before him the face of the man in whom the excuse of the duellist was but the lust of the murderer.

Coldly, unflinchingly, Cecil met the eyes of his opponent. All fierceness and anger had died out of his heart now; there was only a great stillness and a great calm.

“ *One!* ”

A stream of golden light fell through the dark boughs, a bird woke to sing its matin song, and the clear joyous notes thrilled strangely through the quiet space.

“ *Two!* ”

The circling shadows swept away like a mist. It seemed to Cecil that a sudden tremor shook the heavy bushes by which he stood, and yet there was no breath of wind upon his face. The air seemed hot as fire.

“ *Three!* ”

One shot sped harmlessly into the air ; the other——

Cecil never knew then, or in any after-time, how those seconds sped as he staggered back, and felt upon his breast the weight of a woman's form.

The flash of the pistol-fire had been the signal for which she had waited ; and as the weapon fell from his hand he felt warm arms slipping from his neck, and the life that had shielded his own dropped spent, and broken at his feet.

"My God ! What have you done ?"

Time, place, everything was forgotten at that moment. He threw himself by her side in an agony of fear and remorse, and tried with quivering, desperate hands to staunch the blood that stained her soft white dress.

The startled group drew near, awe-struck by this new and unexpected tragedy, and foremost among them stood the husband, whose bullet had taken her life. Cecil looked up and met his eyes.

"She has given her life for mine, and, as there is a heaven above us, she is innocent. Oh, fool, fool, why could you not believe ?"

The words broke from him in the bitterness of an uncontrollable agony. It seemed to him as if the life-blood flowing from her veins had been shed by his own hand.

At the sound of his voice her eyes opened and looked out through the film of death on the faces of the two men whose lives she had ruled and wrecked. Involuntarily she stretched out her hands to her husband.

"Will you believe me—now ?" she said. "I knew you meant to kill him, and that I could not suffer. I wronged him once—so greatly."

With all a Frenchman's facile emotion, the Count threw himself on the ground at her feet, weeping like a child.

"Oh ! my angel, my adored !" he cried wildly. "I was mad ; mad with jealousy and rage to doubt you, but I was so skilfully played upon. I was bidden here, and heard so much, and then—I found you together ; and it looked like surest proof. What could I do ? what could I think ?"

"I do not blame you," answered Faustine very faintly. "No ; do not move me, do not stir. I—am dying, I know. Let me die here—where I fell. You are sorry ?——Ah yes ! I know ; but you have less to regret than I. You—you will harm him no more ; your vengeance is satisfied now. Promise me that——Nay, do not show such grief, it unnerves me ; and I want to say—one thing——ere I die——"

The words fell with difficulty, each growing fainter and more faint. Her face was white as death ; and still slowly, surely, over the mossy ground crept on that crimson stream.

The day had risen to fuller radiance now, and the bird, triumphant in its joy, flew upwards through the arching boughs and circled overhead in the clear and lambent air. Her eyes turned heavenward with a sudden longing, then fell with dreaming tenderness upon the face of the man whom she had loved unto death.

"Will even she love you as I have done?" she whispered. "It is no shame to tell you now, and death is not terrible—here—in your arms. What is it to die, after all, and after such a life as mine has been? Only for my comfort, my last comfort on earth, tell me you will not—quite—forget."

"Forget!" he murmured, and all the old dead passion seemed to revive and quiver in his heart; she was once more only the woman he had wooed and worshipped in the summer woods of Deauville. "As there is a God above us, I shall never forget you! I have loved no other woman as I loved you; I never shall. O God, why did you do this thing?"

"Could I do less? I would not have your life sacrificed for me a second time—I would have faced a hundred deaths to save you—one." And all the imperishable, passionate, hopeless love she had borne him, spoke out at last in her look and in her words.

Those beside them drew pityingly aside. There was something here that moved them to a kindred sympathy, that might have touched the worldliest and coldest heart by the devotion and nobility of a love faithful unto death. She lifted her head from his breast and her eyes sought blindly, yearningly for his own. Already a haze seemed gathering between them; the face she loved, looked far away and indistinct.

"Do you remember when you kissed me first? Only once—— My God! to have loved you so and only once to have had your lips touch mine—— You knew I loved you—then——"

"Yes; as I know the rapture that thought gave, and how soon I lost it."

"It was best—indeed it was. Your life and mine were fatal to each other from the first—— Would he mind—I wonder——if you kissed me now?"

Cecil's lips silenced that doubt as they rested on hers in mute farewell. In an hour like this the thoughts and surmises of the world looked too paltry for consideration. A faint flush and warmth stole over her face as once again those lips touched hers. The mists and darkness fled away, and the radiance of the day itself was not more beautiful than the light that flashed upon him from her eyes.

"I have—loved—you. There is no more to say!"

Her head sank upon his breast, a faint sigh parted her lips.

There was no more, indeed, to say!

Gossip, that has a hundred tongues, ran rife and eager through the world that had known the actors in this sad drama. Scandal chattered, papers revelled in its details. Society journals, which in their own way are always omniscient, edited and romanced to their full on such a windfall of luck as this "Sad tragedy at Rome" was to them.

Of the three principal actors in it, one had gone to the peace of an eternal rest, and the two others who had met as avengers, parted as reconciled foes.

But of course the world would not have believed *that*. Oh dear po! The world had it on the best authority that there had been terrible doings between the young painter (Cecil's real name had not yet leaked out) and the Countess. Society had always known, of course, that she was no better than she should be, and was now positively assured of the fact. And the husband had been insulted, and she had thrown herself between the combatants and been shot. It was really quite like the third act of a drama at the Porte St. Martin.

But afterwards?

Oh, they had met again, and the poor Count de Besançon had been wounded, and was lying ill—almost dying—at Rome, and the young Don Giovanni had made himself scarce, etc., etc.

These and a thousand other tales buzzed and fluttered from mouth to mouth; and were listened to and retailed with untiring zest. But the real facts, viz., that Cecil and the Count had had a calm and rational explanation; that Père Jerome's hand had again been the one to shoot the poisoned arrow; that, when the official inquiries were over, the Count had gone sadly away to a remote part of Switzerland, and Cecil to his own studio, these—society would never have believed for a single moment.

Society always knows our affairs so much better than we do ourselves, and if we are perverse enough not to act in the way it considers appropriate to the occasion, why, it simply fits us with the credit of doing so, as a tailor fits us with a garment.

The stories are sometimes really so pretty and so romantic that it seems quite a pity they haven't the one merit of being

true, at least in a single instance ; but perhaps, after all, that is not of much consequence. They would not read so well in the journals, nor tell so well in the boudoirs and smoking-rooms, if only they happened to be correct in every detail.

Cecil Calverley heard nothing—and, in truth, cared nothing—for what the world was saying. His sorrow and remorse for the tragical fate of the woman he had loved, absorbed him to the exclusion of all else.

When he grew calm once more, the first thing he remembered was Félise ; the second, the conjectures of Faustine respecting the girl he had met that fatal night. By the death of the Countess he had lost a powerful ally ; all hopes now of discovering the child seemed to have fled.

He was in despair. He dared not seek the priest again. He felt that he could never trust himself in his presence ; and he knew not where to turn in order to seek for news of his lost waif.

The girl he had met in the streets of Rome seemed to be his only clue now, and he resolved at last to seek her, and ascertain either from herself or the old musician whether there was any foundation for Faustine's conjectures and his belief.

His own changed fortunes seemed of small account ; his own life seemed too dreary and desolate now for anything to change it. He had received a newspaper from Lord Danvers, with a marked paragraph stating that the Earldom of Strathavon had fallen to the third and only remaining son of the old Earl of Strathavon, the late Earl having left no male issue, and the second son, the Hon. Cecil Calverley, having died abroad some years previously.

“ So Harcourt, too, believes it,” Cecil had thought bitterly ; and then had locked the paper away, and resolved that never should word or deed of his, force his denied rights on the notice of those of his race who had disowned him.

By law of birthright he was a peer of England ; by choice and chance of fortune he was a painter, working for his bread in the lonely splendour of Rome.

“ Surely some evil planet burned on my birthnight,” he thought involuntarily. “ Was ever man so beset by misfortune, I wonder ? I suppose I shall never shake myself free now. It might have been better, after all, had that bullet found its way to my heart instead of—hers ! ” .

CHAPTER III

THE SKY CLEARS

Chaste as the icicle
That's carved by the frost from purest snow
And hangs on Dian's temple.

ROME lay quiet and still under the light of a full white moon. Here and there a figure passed like a shadow, the scent of fruit and flowers was heavy on the air, the sound of the never-ceasing fountains rose and fell like a monotonous melody. With slow and weary steps Cecil took his way to the street he remembered. Inaction had grown unbearable. Something, he felt, he must do.

The old woman whom he had questioned before was absent. A little dusky-skinned lad answered his summons, and grinned and pointed up the narrow stairway as Cecil asked for the girl.

Stumbling up the dark and uneven steps he came to a door. Voices reached him, as he paused in uncertainty; one rang out angry and distinct, yet with an accent of fear in its clear young tones.

"Back, sir! Were Marco here, you would not dare——"

"Dare!" interrupted a man's voice. "He who loves, dares all things, *bellissima*. Nay—be not so frightened, I——"

Cecil dashed open the door.

Standing close beside it, with the light from a bronze lamp falling full upon her flashing eyes and flushed cheeks, was the girl he had met in the streets of Rome two weeks previously. Before her was the handsome, dissolute, laughing countenance of the Prince Sanfriano. Cecil knew the face of the Italian well. In a way he was popular in Rome, and though his fame was notorious, society did not visit his sins too heavily upon his shoulders.

Cecil's sudden advent startled both occupants of the room. The girl looked at him in astonishment. "Your pleasure, signor," she said, as he bowed before her.

"I have come to see you on a matter of business," Cecil answered, as he glanced coldly at the flushed face of the Italian. "It is connected with the Countess de Besançon, of the Villa Frascati. Doubtless you remember the lady?"

"Perfectly," answered the girl, recovering her composure in some degree, before the sense of security the young Englishman's presence lent her.

"My business is *private* and of importance," continued Cecil, with a glance at the Prince, whose frowning brow and angry glance bespoke his feelings at this interruption.

"In that case I fear I intrude," he said, with an effort of courtesy. "Farewell, signora, for the present; I shall give myself the felicity of seeking your presence to-morrow. The question of your journey to Milan demands your immediate attention."

The girl bowed coldly and without response, and as soon as they were alone turned inquiringly to Cecil. "I am glad you came," she said briefly.

"I fear that gentleman was rather discourteous," answered the young man. "Is Signor Rosa not within?"

"No," she said, the flush dying out of her face now and its creamy pallor looking yet more delicate in the moonlight. "It is not often he goes out at night, but he said he had business to attend to, and would be back in an hour. But pray be seated, signor; you have a message for me from the lady at Frascati, you say?"

"Not a message," said Cecil gravely. "Have you not heard that she is dead?"

"Dead!" exclaimed the girl in horror. "Great Heaven! When? How? That beautiful kindly lady dead? Why, it is scarce two weeks since I saw her."

"True; nevertheless she is no longer alive. I wonder you have not heard of her death; but perhaps you live too quietly for the rumours and gossip of the outer world to travel to your ears. I have come to you on her behalf as well as on my own. Her sad and tragic end cut short her intentions towards yourself. It was from her lips I heard your history, it is from your own I seek its confirmation. I have reason to think that the true secret of your birth and life has been discovered."

The beautiful pale face flushed deeply. The girl looked with wide and wondering eyes at the speaker. "You, signor? how should you know aught of me?" She had risen from her chair, and stood before him surprised and uncertain.

All her past was so dim, all those sad years of her childhood so bitter; and the peace and calm of her life now seemed threatened by some strange and unaccountable disturbance.

"It is singular enough," Cecil answered gently, "and I will tell you as briefly as I can; but I must have as much help as your memory can give me. Do you remember aught of your life before you came into the charge of the Italian from whom your present protector saved you?"

"You mean Già?" she said, turning very pale. "I cannot say I do. Everything seems indistinct and confused. I have some faint memory of a kind face—of a little child——"

"A child!" broke in Cecil's voice. "Was she your sister?"

The girl shook her head. "I cannot remember what she was. We lost each other, I think. Then came a long journey, and after that it was—Già."

She shuddered as she spoke that name, and glanced round with sudden terror. "He said I was his," she continued presently, "and I thought I was. My life was terrible till Marco saved me and brought me to Rome. I was disguised as a peasant-boy, and we lived in hiding here for full five years; scarce stirring out, save at nightfall, and making acquaintance with none. I always feared Già would discover us. I fear it still, and Marco is so old now and so helpless. And of myself—I know nothing."

Cecil looked at her with deep compassion. That singular likeness to Félise which had first struck his notice was still more singular now as she stood there with her mournful eyes looking back to his face, and her bright soft hair glistening in the mellow light.

"Sit there, and I will tell you all," he said gently, and taking up the thread of that strange history which had first associated Vere Danvers with Valerie d'Egmont, he went on to trace step by step the events that had befallen the twin sisters.

The girl listened with eager wonder. Her eyes never left his face, her breath came and went with swift and sudden sighs. Link by link the chain of evidence grew clearer now to Cecil's mind by the confession of the priest, than even by Faustine's words.

"Then it was my—father—who gave me to Già?" faltered the girl slowly as his voice ceased.

"I fear so," answered Cecil. "He certainly went to America without your sister or yourself, though he wrote to say you were both under his care."

"And my sister—you know her? Where is she now?" demanded the girl eagerly.

Cecil's brow clouded with the old anxiety and trouble.

"I grieve to say she has been taken from my care. You both have an enemy, unscrupulous and cruel, and his secret machinations are more to be dreaded than any outward warfare. Your sister has been placed in a convent, and I have every reason to fear that she will be forced to take the veil if I cannot discover where she is, and save her by some means. The Countess de Besançon, your mother's sister, as

I told you just now, can no longer assist me. You are equally powerless. My present determination is to send to England for the friend whom your mother appointed your guardian. As your father is now dead—which fact I learned from the priest—I am in hopes that her wishes may at last be carried out. I scarcely think Père Jerome's relationship will count for anything in the eyes of the law."

"This priest, then, was related to my mother?"

"He was her father. He married before he took orders, and the Countess de Besançon and your mother are both his daughters. Of course the relationship was a complete secret all these years, only at last circumstances forced him to tell me the truth."

"And does he know of me?"

"Thank Heaven, no!" exclaimed Cecil eagerly. I hope he may learn nothing either. Once Lord Danvers is here, I shall feel you are safe. I think he will be a match for this wily priest, and his protection will be powerful enough to guard you."

"You know him well, this English lord?" said the girl, looking eagerly at Cecil's changing face.

"He is the only friend I ever cared to possess," answered the young man gravely.

"But will he care to have me; will he believe this strange story? We have no proofs to show; it is almost all conjecture," said the girl hesitatingly.

"Our proofs are strong enough, I fancy," Cecil answered smiling. "The only thing I wish you to do is to keep this matter an entire secret until Lord Danvers arrives."

"Even from Marco?"

"No, certainly not. It is but right he should know. But this Prince, whom I found here, what of him?"

"I do not like him," said the girl scornfully. "He has certainly been very kind, and Rosa thinks he is unequalled for goodness and generosity. But I do not care to accept benefits that lead to insult."

"Insult! Then I was not mistaken in what I heard?"

"I do not know what you heard," the girl said proudly. "He said he loved me; he has said that often. It is nothing to me. Only Rosa has accepted so much at his hands, and he is bent upon my appearing at Milan in opera, and the Prince has so much influence."

"I understand," answered Cecil quietly. "But I think the Prince will not trouble you more. I will inform him how matters stand, and perhaps he will not be so ready to ignore an English peer, who is your guardian, as he has been to insult your present protector."

The girl's cheeks flushed ; she rose to her feet eagerly, and her emotion lent a yet more touching beauty to the fair young face.

"How kind you have been to take all this trouble for me—for us," she said ; "how can I ever thank you ? It seems as if you had opened Paradise to my eyes. Oh ! if I could only meet my sister ; it seems strange to think we are so nearly bound to each other, and yet are strangers. Do you think she is unhappy, suffering, in trouble ? "

"I fear she is most unhappy," Cecil answered gravely. "But if it lies in human power to save her, she shall be saved. She is too dear to me to be sacrificed while I have life, or strength, or will left to prevent it ; and, hopeless as the case looks, I have not yet given myself up to despair."

"Is she—is she like me ?" the girl asked hesitatingly.

"She might be your double," answered Cecil. "It was that extraordinary resemblance which first attracted my notice. When I met you in the street that night—do you remember it ?—I thought you were Félise. I called out her name."

"Yes, I remember," she answered with that lovely blush rising again to the transparent skin ; "and I was alarmed ; and then you came here, the woman told me. Oh, signor, if I had but known——"

Cecil rose and held out his hand.

"It matters little now," he said. "We have arrived at the truth all the same, only——"

His voice broke suddenly. He remembered that night, that fatal night. If only he had seen the girl and spoken to her ; if only an hour's delay had kept him from Faustine's presence, what difference might it not have made ! He forgot the presence of the girl ; insensibly his thoughts drifted to that last interview with the woman whose love had been so cursed by fate. He recalled, too, point by point the relation of her own lips and the curious analogy and possibility which her words shadowed forth, and the evidence to which they had pointed.

"Will you not stay until Marco returns ?" said the girl gently.

He started, remembering her at last.

"Not to-night, not to-night," he said hurriedly. "Tell him all I have said. With to-morrow I will seek him myself," and he left her hurriedly and abruptly, without another word.

She went over to the casement and leaned there awhile, her eyes full of grateful tears, her heart beating with rapid pulsations. How sweet and fair looked this new life that

was to dawn for her, that would sweep away all the horrors and darkness of her childhood, the troubles of her youth, as the sun's rays sweep away the shadows of night!”

“How good, how kind, how noble he is!” she murmured softly. “If it had been to *his* guardianship my mother had left us——”

She checked the thought, with a sudden sigh, then turned swiftly to the opening door. It was Marco who entered, his face looked ghastly, his frame was trembling. The girl flew to his side and drew him to a seat.

“What is it? What has happened?” she asked in alarm. He sank back in the chair and grasped her arm.

“I have seen—Già,” he said.

BOOK VI

CHAPTER I

Who hath known the pain, the old, old pain of earth,
Or all the travail of the sea,
Who hath known, who knoweth, oh gods! not we.

It was close upon midnight. The night was dark and still, and under the arching trees the owls hooted, and the bats flew by, and the straight slim poplars threw strange shadows on the road.

Across those shadows fell from time to time the moving figure of a woman. She walked slowly and wearily along, and her black draperies were dusty and travel-stained; the face on which the moonlight fell was white and anxious; she started at every sound of the rustling foliage or moving wings.

“Such an endless way—such an endless way,” she was saying to herself. “Shall I ever reach it?”

Fatigue overcame her at last. She staggered aside from the great high-road and sat down under the poplar trees, and resting her head against the stem of one, fell asleep for very weariness. It was full dawn when she awoke. She started to her feet, and looked about her frightened and perplexed. The sun was gilding the hills in the distance, a faint tinkle of bells reached her ears, a welcome sound enough, for it spoke of some peasant's passing cart, such as had already borne her on part of her weary journey towards Paris. She moved towards the open road again and saw a

man driving his horses slowly along, the bells of their harness jingling at every step, and his cheery voice urging them forward in the country *patois* that had so odd a sound to her ears.

She went towards him timidly, and he stayed his horses and looked with evident wonder at the slender figure in its quaint black draperies, and the piteous eyes that gazed so appealingly up to his own.

"Paris? Oh, it is many leagues farther," he said, repeating her question. "Do you wish to go there? Why do you not take the railway? There is a station there, half a mile to the right. You could be in the city in three hours' time."

"I cannot. I have no money," she answered despondently.

"No money? Ah, that is bad," the man said, looking at her with renewed curiosity. "Have you come from far?"

"Yes," she answered briefly. "I have friends in Paris whom I seek, and I must get there to-day."

"Will you let me take you as far as I go?" said the man kindly. "You look tired, and the way is long. You are quite welcome if you care to come."

She looked up at him gratefully. "You are very kind," she said. "Yes, I am indeed weary; but I have no money."

"I do not need payment," he answered roughly. "Come if you will. It will at least save your feet some of this rough road."

She mounted the cart without further objection. Her one great longing now was to get to Paris. She felt she could never be safe until the vastness of the city had shut her in from the pursuit she dreaded.

The escape from the convent had been managed at last with the aid of Sœur Stéphanie; but though free from its walls, she feared greatly that Père Jerome would not rest until he had tracked her. Without money, without friends, without knowledge of the place to which she was directed, yet still the spirit within her was strong enough to bear all perils and oppose all obstacles. The peasant, as he drove along and chattered to his horses and cracked his whip, looked at her with evident curiosity. He tried to question her, but her answers were too guarded and too brief to give him any satisfaction, and so he gave up the task as hopeless; but, being a kindly-natured man, he was glad to be of some service to one apparently so friendless and so poor.

When the noonday sun was bright and hot in the cloudless sky, the man drew up his horses before a little roadside tavern. "I go no farther," he said to the girl. "You had best rest here awhile. The woman is a friend of mine, she will give you some food and a draught of wine. You look as

if you needed some. Payment? Pooh! that is of no matter. When you have found your friends, you can pay me then. Come, enter; this heat is bad for you, and you can reach Paris by nightfall even if you rest here for a couple of hours.” Gratefully and thankfully she accepted the kindly offer. The man was as good as his word. Behind the *auberge* was a little garden: a small, shady, fragrant place, with tables set under the trees, and seats scattered about, and the scents of roses and the June sunshine everywhere. Her tired eyes took in the pretty homely scene with a sense of intense relief, and she sank back on one of the rustic chairs and felt the breeze softly stirring among the drooping leaves above her head. The woman spread a clean linen cloth on the wooden table, and brought her food and wine, and chattered in a pleasant kindly fashion, and waited on her as on an honoured guest, and when she had finished her meal, led her to a small but clean chamber in the upper storey of the house, and bade her lie down and rest till the heat of the day was over.

She was so utterly spent and weary that she fell at once into a deep dreamless sleep, and only awoke at sunset. She started up, alarmed at the lateness of the hour. It would be night when she reached Paris now, and she knew nothing of the way that led to this street where Sœur Stéphanie had said some humble friends of those old days of her early life had lived, and with whom she hoped to find shelter until such time as she could write, or acquaint Cecil with her escape.

She bathed her face and arms and shook the dust from her clothes, and then went down the narrow wooden stairs. The woman met her there, and greeted her kindly.

“After all, you need not walk,” she said. “A neighbour has just called in, in passing, and he is carrying eggs and butter in his cart, and goes straight to Paris. He will drive you if you like.”

“You are most kind,” said the girl gratefully. “I am very weary still, and should be glad to accept your offer, but——”

“Oh, I know what you would say,” interrupted the good woman cheerily. “That is of no account; we do not seek for payment. It would be hard indeed if one could not do a kindness for another without looking what it will bring of benefit. You are but a child, and in trouble, and alone; and I am a childless woman. I wish I could serve you in some better way. You are sure you will find friends in Paris?”

“Yes,” said the girl, her face brightening. “Once there I am quite safe.”

“Baudoin will take you as far as the Porte St. Martin,”

continued the woman. "Have you any idea in what direction your friends live?"

The girl took a small folded paper from her dress, and read out: "Rue des Murs, de la Roquette, near Père la Chaise."

"I will tell Baudoin to direct you," said the woman. "I know nothing of Paris myself. It is a great, wonderful city, and wicked—so they say. But Baudoin knows; he has relatives there, and takes his eggs and poultry every week to the great Halles Centrales. I will bid him direct you; and, if you will pardon the liberty, might I not lend you a cap such as the peasants wear? You would attract less notice in the streets, and your face is a fair one, and you are so young, and there is no one to protect you."

Félice accepted the offer unhesitatingly. Any disguise was welcome to her in her great dread; and arrayed in the snowy cap and apron lent by the woman of the *auberge*, she left the little place, and set out with many grateful thanks on the last stage of her journey.

"If Cecil were to see me now," she thought to herself as the cart jolted along over the hard and stony road. "Oh, if he only knew—if I could only reach him!"

The intense longing made her faint and sick. So great a dread was always on her now lest something might happen, lest she might have been tracked, lest the people to whom she had been directed in Paris might not be found, and she should be homeless, roofless, alone, in the great city.

The way seemed very long, the progress very slow.

Women were working in the fields, cattle were browsing in the grass, children played by the streamlets and under the shade of the full-leaved chestnut trees. Little villages lay scattered about among the woods and under the shelter of the green hills; and when the stars began to come out one by one, she saw at last a shining circle of lights glittering in the distance, and heard the welcome words for which she had been longing:

"*Tiens, mademoiselle, voyez donc, c'est Paris.*" The blood flushed her face, she forgot all weariness and languor and fear. It looked so near to her, that beautiful diadem of light, and within its radiance were hope and shelter at last. Upon the way she had been in fear of every passing figure, of every curious eye that rested on her face. Once in that labyrinth, once a unit in the vast crowds that filled those brilliant streets, and she would be safe.

But near as the city looked, it was a long, long time before they were in its midst, and it seemed to her as if the horses crawled with ever-increasing slowness through the glittering

boulevards and dazzling streets, that were thronged with pleasure-seekers, and filled with moving crowds.

“This is where I stop,” said the man suddenly as he drew up his horses. “Mère Pomponnet said you wished to go towards La Roquette. It is a bad neighbourhood to seek at night.”

“Oh, I am quite safe. I have no fear,” said the girl eagerly as she sprang to the ground. “You have been very kind, I shall not forget you. Is this where I may find you at any time? My friends will wish to thank you also, I am sure, for the service you have rendered.”

“You are heartily welcome,” he answered; “and if you don’t think you can find the way, and will wait till I put up the horses, and have some supper——”

“Oh no! oh no!” she cried eagerly. “Indeed, I have no fear. I can find my way if you direct me, and every moment is of consequence.”

“You must go straight along till you come to the Boulevard Richard Lenoir,” said her director. “You will reach the Place Voltaire; to its east is the Rue de la Roquette. You will see the prison on the right; the street you want is somewhere near there. I cannot direct you more nearly.”

“A thousand thanks,” said the girl eagerly. “I am sure I can find the way. Good-bye, now; you will find I shall not forget your kindness.”

“Kindness! *Grand chose, ça,*” muttered the man, as he watched the slight graceful figure moving rapidly away, with the eager step of youth and exultation. “She has a fair face and is of gentle birth, I am sure. I wonder what she does in Paris alone?”

Straight on through the crowds that thronged the streets, past the lighted cafés and noisy multitudes, the girl took her way. She had no fear, though men looked eagerly at her face, and sometimes spoke to her, as the crowd hemmed her in. With rapid steps she moved on in the direction she had been told, and it was only when she came to the poor and dingy neighbourhood where the massive edifice of La Roquette towered in frowning grandeur, that a pang of fear struck her heart.

The street was poor and narrow, the people looked dirty and squalid, the shops were of the wretchedest description. She looked up at the wall and saw she had reached her destination, and went slowly up the dirty narrow way called Rue des Murs de la Roquette. No. 7 was the house written on her card. It proved to be a shoemaker’s stall. An old man sat within: he was hammering away at the sole of a pair of coarse working boots; an ill-looking man, in a tattered blouse, was leaning against the doorway smoking.

The girl put her question very timidly to the shoemaker. He paused in his work, and looked up at her in surprise.

"Monsieur Mévert? No, he does not live here—he left two years ago."

The girl's heart sank; she stood there trembling and dispirited. What to do next she could not think.

The man in the blouse took his pipe from his mouth and spat on the ground, and looked with bold, rude eyes at her face.

"Can I assist you, *ma jolie p'tite*?" he asked. "You seem a stranger to Paris."

"Thank you, no," she answered, shrinking back from his gaze, and with a sudden sense of dismay and terror upon her at the thought of her position. "You—you do not know, I suppose, where Monsieur Mévert went when he left here?" she questioned timidly of the old shoemaker.

He shook his head.

"No; I have no idea."

She turned away with paling lips; the movement brought her face to face with a dark foreign man, approaching the little stall. He looked at her with a curious intentness, then passed on and spoke to the shoemaker. An instant after, she heard the sound of rapid steps, and glancing round, saw him hurrying towards her. He took off his cap and spoke to her eagerly, and with something like fear, or so she fancied.

"Your pardon, mademoiselle. You were seeking for Monsieur Mévert. May I ask who sent you to him?"

She drew back a little frightened, and not knowing whether to resent his question as an impertinence. The man guessed her feeling and spoke again.

"Believe me, I ask from no idle curiosity. There is but one person who could have known that Jules Mévert lived here. If you come from—her——"

His voice broke, his olive face grew pallid, his eyes had a strange, beseeching, hunted look, that frightened the girl.

"I was directed to him by one whose name I cannot give you," she said coldly. "But if you knew Monsieur Mévert you may know also something of where he is now."

The man shook his head.

"I know nothing of his present address," he said. "And I suppose you are right not to trust me, only—oh, Heaven, if it should be from her! Tell me but one thing. Is it a woman who has sent you thither?"

"Yes," answered Félise, growing more and more alarmed by his excited manner.

"A woman, and her name—was it Carlotta Rosello?"

"Yes," she faltered. "Do you, then, know her, monsieur?"

“Know her? Santa Vierge! Know her? Tell me of her; is she well? is she happy? when did you see her last? Oh, my child, my child, why is it not yourself who has come to me?”

“Your—child,” faltered Félice in wonder. “Are you, then, Carlo Rosello?”

He started and glanced round as if in terror. “Do not speak so loud. Yes, I am he, and the woman who sent you thither is my child. I have not seen her for years. Oh! tell me of her. She is well and fair and happy? She remembers me—say?”

The impetuous words died suddenly off his tongue. Something in the girl’s face seemed to alarm him.

“Will you come into my room?” he asked hoarsely. “It is a poor place enough, but you will be safe. You can trust me, and my heart is hungering for news of my child. Here, I dare not speak all I would. Will you come?”

The girl bowed her head, and followed him without a word. It was indeed a wretched place to which he led her, but she scarcely noticed that. She too was greatly agitated. What would this man say when he heard of his daughter’s fate? He seemed quite unconscious of it as yet.

“Now tell me,” the eager voice entreated. “She is with friends, I am sure. That is all I know. *Where* is she?”

“She is at the convent of ‘Le Cœur Sacré,’ near Brest,” said Félice.

“In a convent. I knew nought of that. Stay—she is not—oh, Heaven, no, he could never have deceived me thus. Child, speak, tell me—*what* is she?”

“A nun,” answered Félice, quietly. “Did you not know?”

His face grew cold and white, but a terrible lurid light leaped up into his eyes, and his hands clenched like a vice on the chair by which he stood. “A nun! lost to me—buried alive. May all the devils in hell curse the soul of the villain who has deceived me!”

And like a stone he dropped down at the feet of the terrified girl.

CHAPTER II

e JUSTICE

There are bad thoughts in me ;
Most bitter fancies biting me like birds
That tear each other.—*Chastelard.*

IN the *salle d'attente* of the Gare de Lyon a group of people were waiting till the opening of the doors allowed them to get to the platform, by which stood the express for Rome. Among them was an Englishman, pacing to and fro the room with the impatience and intolerance of his countrymen—at a novel custom—expressed in every line of his face. As he glanced over the sub-divisions of the compartment where the intending travellers were patiently awaiting release, his eye fell upon two persons who had just entered that of the second class.

He stopped in his walk as if suddenly arrested, and gazed eagerly at the face of a girl, who stood beside a dark foreign-looking man. She was dressed in black, and closely veiled ; but the momentary glimpse of her face had recalled a memory that he felt he must satisfy. He watched her and her companion with mingled feelings of wonder and curiosity, and, as the doors were thrown open and the throng at last released, he managed to get close beside her as the man hurried her along to the train. They stopped before a second-class carriage.

For an instant the Englishman faced the girl and spoke to her unceremoniously : “Mdlle. Félice, is it indeed you ?”

A strange cry, half glad, half fearful, left the girl's lips.

“Lord Danvers ?”

“Yes,” he answered somewhat sternly. “It is you, then, mademoiselle. May I speak to you for a moment ?”

The cry of “*En voiture, en voiture,*” sent everyone rushing to their carriages. Lord Danvers held out his hand to the girl. “Get in here,” he said, and without an instant's hesitation she obeyed, her companion following. The carriage was untenanted. The three passengers seated themselves ; as the door closed the girl threw back her veil, and looked eagerly at Vere's face.

“My lord,” she said hurriedly, “you are surprised to see me here ? Ah ! what must you all have thought of me, this long time ?”

“Thought ?” answered Lord Danvers. “Well, we have searched far and wide for news of you—that I know.

Mr. Cecil has been distracted. As for my mother—; but these things are of no moment now. What is your explanation, mademoiselle?"

The girl coloured faintly at the stern coldness of the questioning voice.

"Ah, monsieur!" she said eagerly, "it was no fault of mine, believe me. I was entrapped, deceived, carried off to a convent in France, and there imprisoned. I might never have escaped, if it had not been for the kindness of one of the nuns who contrived to let me out one night when the portress was asleep. She gave me an address in Paris of some former friend or acquaintance of her own. I have walked half the way, and been indebted to charity for food and aid, otherwise I should never have reached the city. This gentleman is the father of the nun who helped me to escape. I found him by accident at the address of her friends. I told him all, and he is going with me to Rome without delay. I thought I should find Monsieur Cecil there."

Lord Danvers glanced in evident surprise at the strange-looking man who had been thus unceremoniously introduced to his notice. His appearance little pleased the fastidious taste of the Englishman. He saw a man of middle age, with a face delicately cut, but lined and haggard, and bearing marks of an evil and dissipated life. The eyes were dark as night, and had a strange, fearful, hunted look, as if ever in dread of the glances they met. The jet-black hair was thickly sprinkled with silver; he wore a low broad-brimmed hat, which he kept well over his face, and as he now met Lord Danvers' calm and direct gaze, a sort of deprecating entreaty stole into his eyes. He bowed with a southerner's grace.

"Mademoiselle is quite safe with me," he murmured. "I am taking her to her protector. I have business with him myself."

"Signor Rosello has an important communication to make to Monsieur Cecil," said Félise timidly. She felt odd, and strange, and half fearful of Lord Danvers: he looked so cold and stern. He did not even seem glad that she was free from the toils of her persecutors.

After that one look which seemed to read the weak and vacillating temperament of the Italian, and form its own opinion thereon, Vere turned to Félise.

"I wonder you did not come to England," he said. "You would have been safe with my mother, and we could have telegraphed to Cecil Calverley from Calsthorpe."

A low hoarse cry cut short his words. It came from the Italian. Blanched with fear, trembling in every limb, he

cowered back on the seat and covered his face with hands that trembled and shook as one in an ague fit. Vere and Félise looked at him in amazement. The girl stooped towards him in soft compassion.

"Are you ill? Can I do anything for you?" she asked.

The man's whole frame quivered as if under physical torture. For some moments he could not speak. Then he seemed to recover himself by a strong effort. The hands dropped from his white face. "It was a sudden pain," he said, laying his hand on his heart. "Pardon, mademoiselle, if I have alarmed you. I am better now. I will open the window with your permission and get some air."

He staggered over and leant out of the window, and let the warm summer wind blow on his face, while all the time the fear in his eyes never changed, and his heart beat with deadly sickness.

The girl looked at him in wonder, and a little fear. Lord Danvers accepted his explanation, and seemed to feel no further concern in his sufferings. He was too full of wonder about Félise, too anxious to hear all that strange story of hers, which had held, crowded into its short space of weeks, events that might have coloured half a lifetime. They talked on of all that had happened, and then came the account of the news Vere Danvers had received from Cecil, and which had necessitated this hurried journey. Félise listened in trembling delight to the recital of her sister's discovery; but the old dread and horror of the priest was so strongly rooted within her mind, that it embittered even the joy of this new-found relationship. Lord Danvers tried his best to calm her fears, by assuring her that her father's death left him free to exercise the office of guardian as her mother had appointed, and that consequently Père Jerome could do nothing in the matter. But the girl would not be convinced.

"When he came to me in the convent," she said, "he told me that my father had left a will, appointing *him* to take charge of us. It appears my father died in San Francisco, and all his directions are known only to Père Jerome."

The figure leaning by the window had slowly seated itself again, and with averted head and eager ears listened to the conversation. The trembling hands were still now, but the hidden eyes gathered a fierce and lurid light into their dark depths.

Not a word escaped him. Hatred and revenge lent keenness to his hearing, and outward calmness to his face. A terrible purpose was at work within his heart, and here, thrown across his very path, were the weapons to serve his will.

"At last, at last," he muttered in his teeth, and all the

vague, shapeless thoughts grew into one stern and overmastering impulse. He turned impulsively to the English lord and laid his hand on his arm.

“That priest you speak of has been the foe and tyrant of my life,” he said. “I was his tool, his agent, the worker of much of his villainy. His secrets, many of them, are in my keeping; I will place him in your power now. You are rich and powerful, and I am poor and crime-stained and desolate. I swore to him fidelity, and I gave it, and would have given it to the end, but he has deceived me. He has broken his promise to the one thing I loved in this world. Your enemy and mine are the same, my lord. Well, yours shall be the triumph. That will he spoke of was scoured by fraud. It is in his keeping, true, but when he says it empowers him to act as guardian of those children, he lies. I have seen the deed, my lord, and it gives their charge to—you!”

“To me!”

The man bowed. “This is but a tithe of his villainies, his schemes,” he said. “I have kept silence long enough, I have led a dog’s life at his bidding, and would have so suffered and kept silent till the end but for—her. He shall learn that the worm he has crushed into the dust can turn at last; and were my vengeance but barren justice, yet nevertheless should it be his reward now.”

Then there was a moment’s breathless silence. The train rushed swiftly on, the bright summer landscape flew by in a changing panorama of beauty. The glowing sunlight, the fragrant air, all these were unnoticed by those three so strangely met, one of whom told, while the others listened to, a history too terrible almost for credence, the precursor of a yet more terrible tragedy that was to follow.

The long hot hours went by. With but slight pauses here and there, the express dashed on its way.

The soft dusk closed over the now altered landscape, the stars came out one by one, the night with its fragrance and beauty fell like a shadowy veil over the quiet and the peace of the sleeping earth. Wearied and spent by previous fatigue and the long journey, Félise had sunk to sleep on the pile of soft rugs and shawls that Lord Danvers had arranged. After a while he too felt drowsy, and grew tired of looking out at the darkness and the shadows as the train whirled by. He leant back and closed his eyes, and in a few moments was as fast asleep as if he had been in his own bed in his own comfortable bachelor quarters in the Albany.

The third inmate of the carriage alone did not sleep.

Sin-steeped, evil 'as his life had been, it yet had not hardened him into indifference. The remorse that had haunted him since the last fatal deed he had committed at his tyrant's bidding, fastened on his mind afresh now. His victim's blood seemed once more crying in the silence of the summer night, for vengeance on a murderer. He shuddered as he thought of what the feelings of his two companions would be did they know with whom they sat, did they guess that the hand that had touched theirs was red with the foulest stain that crime can call its own !

"My life will soon be over now," he muttered, looking out with blank unseeing eyes at the shining stars. "Vengeance on him means justice for myself. Well, what of that? Has life been so sweet and fair a thing that I should care to live? and now he has slain my one hope. Oh, my child—my child, never to see your sweet eyes smile on me, never to know that I can call you mine again, never to know that my life's long martyrdom had touched its promised reward! O God! if he had but spared *you*."

He leaned towards the window and hid his face on his folded arms. The train was slackening speed, but he never heeded it. It stopped; there came a flash of lights, a sound of voices. The carriage door opened and another passenger entered. Still he never moved. The whistle sounded, the express dashed on. He sat there lost to all sense of time and place, forgetful of all save the brute longing of an intense hatred, the anguish that throbbed like living fire within his veins as he saw how he had been trapped, foiled, deceived. At last he lifted his head and pushed back the hat from his aching brow. The light from the dim lamp burning in the carriage illumined his face. His eyes fell on the figure of a man seated opposite to himself.

There was a start, a hurried exclamation; then in a second's space he had sprung forwards and seized him by the throat with a grip deadly as hate, and lust, and unsparing fury could make it.

"Fiend! devil! has hell sent you to me now?" he muttered in his ear; for before him he saw his foe.

The priest's hat fell off, he writhed impotently in that strong and terrible grasp. He had scarcely recognised his foe ere he found himself attacked and pinioned, with neither power to move or cry. Maddened, brutalised, drunk with longing for the vengeance Fate had thrust into his hands furious with the memory of his wrongs, the Italian had but one thought—to slay his foe as his hand was at his throat, as the blackened face and starting eyes looked back to him with a horrible unlikeness to the face he knew.

Those seconds seemed like years, so much was concentrated into their brief passage. The priest made one desperate effort at release, but he was no match for the mad and reckless fury of the man he had entrapped and ruined. As he made that frantic struggle, he forced the body of his foe against the carriage door. If its fastening had been imperfect, he could not remember then, that it was his own hand that had led the way to death.

It opened suddenly !

With a faint gasp of terror his opponent fell back into the black void of night, dragging him with him.

A cry, wild and terrible, thrilled through the silence, as Félise started to her feet. The carriage door swayed to and fro. She had but caught a glimpse of a falling figure ; she only thought an accident had happened to the Italian. Her cry awoke Lord Danvers ; but, scarce stopping to explain, she dashed open the glass at the side of the carriage and rung the alarm bell.

In a moment all was tumult and confusion. Voices sounded, lights flashed, the panting engine hissed and steamed, a monster of arrested fury. Guards hurried up to the carriage where the fatal door was swaying on its hinges.

"An accident ! Someone has fallen out. He cannot be far," shouted Lord Danvers. "For God's sake search, and with speed !"

There was some voluble discussion, and then two men with lanterns went down the line in the direction indicated. Heads appeared now at all the windows. Volleys of questions were shouted and answered by conjectures and rumours.

It seemed an eternity till one of the men returned with the information that two men had been found lying on the rails ; one was dead, the other dying. It had been impossible to convey them to the train, so his comrade had gone for assistance to a farmhouse near by.

"Two men !" exclaimed Lord Danvers in amazement.

"Yes ; and one of them, the one still living, was a priest. He was in a bad way, but the other guard would no doubt procure assistance at the farmhouse they had seen, and the men would be taken there. Meanwhile the train must go on. They could not delay longer. Information could be given at the next station. That was all to be done."

The door closed, the whistle sounded, they were off once more. Vere Danvers turned to the trembling girl beside him. "A priest !" he said involuntarily.

She looked at him. The same thought had come to them both. A shudder shook her from head to foot.

"Is it the justice of Heaven ?" she murmured faintly.

CHAPTER III

My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.

King Richard III.

It was nearly two hours before the train stopped at the next station, Modane. Lord Danvers had resolved to alight there, and give information to the authorities of what had occurred, and then write or telegraph to Cecil Calverley, to acquaint him with the cause of his delay. He had thought a few hours might be lost by these measures, but no more; he had not reckoned, however, for the obstinacy and stupidity of foreign officials. The next morning he was politely but respectfully informed that he could not be allowed to proceed on his journey till the mysterious murder had been thoroughly inquired into. The Englishman, with all his nation's prejudice and intolerance of foreign customs, fumed and chafed at the delay, but he found there was no help for it, and leaving Félise at the hotel, he was obliged to proceed to the little village where the two men had been conveyed, and where the priest was lying between life and death.

It was in the full sultry heat of the summer morning that he found himself in a room of the little, white, low-roofed farmhouse, where, stretched in the last stage of exhaustion and with senses stupefied by bodily agony, lay the form of Père Jerome.

"He takes heed of no one," murmured the woman who was attending him.

Lord Danvers came in and stood at the foot of the bed while the midsummer glory of the day fell about his head like an aureole, and seemed to throw out the splendid height and vigour of his own form in contrast to that on which he gazed. An old priest, with a placid gentle face, was kneeling by the side of the dying man, murmuring over prayers and petitions which he never seemed to hear; prayers which sounded to Vere Danvers' ear an awful mockery in such a hour, when the perfidy of this closing life had found its retributive justice, and the long record of crime and sin was drawing to an end at last.

"Has he said anything?" asked one of the officials of the old priest.

"He has made a deposit," said the priest, "and seems quite unconscious."

"You had better read

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